SHADOW SLAVE
VI
ALL THE DEVILS ARE HERE

Shadow Slave

Volume-6

All the Devils Are Here

Chapter-1061: Dire Strait

"Sunny… come here! I'll… I'll only kill you a little…"

"Get the hell away from me, you demented zombie!"

Sunny took a few steps back, easily avoiding the grasp of the shambling corpse of Master Jet. Fortunately, she was not too fast — in fact, she could barely crawl. Her nails powerlessly scratched against the alloy, and Soul Reaper let out a hoarse, disappointed hiss.

"Damn it…"

Sunny shook his head. Despite Jet's weakened state, avoiding her clutches was a tiresome task — mostly because there was nowhere really for him to run. Currently, the two of them were trapped on an alloy raft that was drifting slowly across the strait between the Antarctic Center and the vast landmass to the east.

When Jet lost control of herself, all Sunny could do was endlessly circle the raft and wait for her to come to her senses.

"Come here, Sunny! I won't bite…"

He gave her a dark look, then picked up his chair, walked over to the other end of their improvised vessel, and calmly sat down. The length of the raft was no more than ten meters, but for Soul Reaper, that was a vast distance right now. She stared at him for a while, then gave up and rolled on her back with a curse, looking at the sky with a resigned expression.

When Jet remained still, she really looked like a corpse. And technically, she was… but at least in this cold, she was not a rotting corpse. One had to count their blessings.

Unlike the souls of all Awakened, hers was not able to generate

essence on its own. Worse than that, her soul core was shattered and constantly leaked what little essence she had left. Once the essence completely ran out, Soul Reaper would truly and forever perish.

The only way for her to survive was to continuously kill living beings and absorb their soul essence. That was actually Jet's Sleeper Ability. Her Awakened Ability allowed her to bypass all forms of physical defense and strike directly at the souls of her enemies, which was where her fearsome nickname, Soul Reaper, had come from.

Her Ascended Ability was to slowly absorb shards of broken soul cores from those she had killed to build up and strengthen her own, both in terms of size and capacity. It also removed the natural limit of essence infusion that the flesh of most living beings had, allowing Jet to oversaturate her body with essence and achieve truly superb levels of strength, speed, and resilience.

Hers was a Supreme Aspect.

…Sadly, right now, Jet had no essence to spare on strengthening her body. She barely had enough to keep it from collapsing entirely, and even that last reserve was slowly running out.

Things had not gone well for them after the destruction of Falcon Scott.

Even after the Winter Beast retreated into the depths of the Antarctic Center, its dire influence remained. Neither Sunny nor Jet had been able to access their Dream Realm anchors, which meant that they could not escape from the waking world. Eventually, the two of them had been left with only one choice — to try and brave the strait.

Actually, there was no need for them to even reach East Antarctica. All they had to do was sail far enough into the ocean to leave the area of influence of the Corrupted Titan, which would allow both to return to the Dream Realm. That would still be dangerous, but not as dangerous as remaining in the Winter Beast's frozen realm.

There were no ships coming, and no seaworthy vessels left intact in Falcon Scott. In the end, Sunny had been forced to improvise.

The alloy raft they were currently drifting on… was not just a random sheet of light alloy. It was actually the Covetous Coffer.

That Memory of his possessed an enchantment called [Mendacious Coffer], which allowed it to mimic the forms of inanimate objects. Additionally, the size and intricacy of the simulacrum were dependent on Sunny's Shadow Core capacity. By now, he was very close to becoming an Ascended Tyrant, so obviously, that capacity was much greater than when he had first acquired the Coffer.

So, Sunny had turned it into a raft. It was much larger than the alloy chest the Coffer usually looked like, at the expense of the complexity. Even better, the [Locomotive Chiffonier] enchantment allowed the raft to propel itself forward at a modest speed.

Most importantly, though, the Covetous Coffer was an Ascended Memory of the Fourth Tier, and as such, it was tremendously more durable than even the strongest alloy would have been. If something attacked them from below… which had already happened a few times… the raft was not going to be destroyed unless the attacking Nightmare Creature happened to be truly terrifying.

Sunny and Jet had ventured into the strait on top of the Covetous Coffer, hoping to leave the Winter Beast's area of influence in about a day. And… they had. Sadly, their situation did not really improve after that.

As it turned out, there were numerous Nightmare Gates hidden below the cold waters of the ocean here. Perhaps there were too many, or perhaps their luck had just been truly atrocious, but even now, a week later, Sunny and Jet had yet to encounter a place where the Call of Nightmare would not instantly whisk them away if they tried to leave for the Dream Realm.

At this point, it would be easier for them to actually reach East Antarctica. They had made it two-thirds of the way, already. The mighty battleships of the government fleet were able to make the trip in a day or two, but the Covetous Coffer was much slower — so, it was going to take them a few more days to make landfall.

Sunny did not feel too much pressure. Saint was standing guard with

Morgan's Warbow in her hands, warding off most of the sea creatures. Sunny and Saint were capable of dealing with almost every normal threat. If something they could not deal with were to attack from the depths, he could use a combination of Memories to take flight.

If they were attacked in the skies, he could dive deep into the ocean.

The only problem he had was that Jet would periodically lose her mind and half-heartedly try to kill him.

Sitting in his luxurious chair, Sunny threw a look at Soul Reaper's unmoving corpse and sighed.

'Damnation…'

Chapter-1062: Gone Fishing

Sunny was not too worried about being able to reach East Antarctica. Unless something truly harrowing rose from the depths of the ocean to devour them, he was certain of his ability to either kill or escape it.

However, he was worried about Jet.

A week ago, she had been weak… but not nearly as weak as she was now. Her mental state was also getting worse. He knew that Soul Reaper had been intentionally starving her body of essence in order to conserve as much of it as possible, but still…

Sunny did not know how much longer she would last. Right now, she was not even able to afford summoning a Memory... every drop of essence counted, and there was very little of it left in her shattered soul core.

Which presented a problem.

Saint was capable of killing most Nightmare Creatures that attacked them with her bow, and Sunny was not far behind her in terms of lethality. However, Jet was in no condition to kill anything.

But despite that...

As he considered his options, the corpse stirred, then started laboriously crawling in his direction again, demented lights burning in its glassy blue eyes.

"Come here... come here…"

Sunny stared at her with distaste, then shook his head and stood up. His shadow sense spread outward, encompassing as much of the world as he could perceive.

He remained motionless for a while, allowing the corpse to draw dangerously close. Jet's hollow eyes glinted.

"Got you!"

Before she could grab his shin, however, Sunny sighed… and dove off the edge of the raft, disappearing under the cold water. The Graceless Dusk dissipated into dancing threads of black silk.

Jet seemed startled by his disappearance. She fruitlessly clawed at the surface of the raft a couple of times, then grew still.

"...He's gone."

A hoarse sigh escaped from her bluish lips. She didn't inhale after that.

By now, even breathing was a chore. She didn't really need to, anyway.

The corpse remained motionless for a long time. Eventually, a black bird landed on the raft, hopped over to the corpse, and stared at it curiously. A few moments later, the crow tried to peck one of the glassy eyes out.

Jet blinked.

"You stop that, Crow Crow, or I'm going to make you into a soup."

The bird hurriedly jumped away, seemingly nervous.

"Soup! Soup!"

Its voice sounded indignant. Soul Reaper looked at the bird silently, then rasped:

"Did you find land?"

The crow spread its wings and waved them a couple of times.

"Land! Land!"

The corpse tried to smile, which looked quite disturbing. Even Saint

spared it an indifferent glance.

"How far is it?"

The bird ruffled its feathers and made another hop back.

"Far! Far!"

Jet gritted her teeth.

"I know that it's far, you stupid bird! How far?!"

The Echo simply stared at her in confusion. After a couple of seconds, it cawed proudly:

"How! How!"

Soul Reaper hissed, then hit her head against the alloy surface of the raft a couple of times.

"Goddammit!"

After that small outburst, she didn't say anything else, remaining still and unmoving.

The raft swayed gently on the waves. Below the raft, hundreds of small metallic feet were furiously paddling the cold water. On top of it, a living statue, a talking corpse, and a small black bird were silently waiting.

…Some time later, the water behind the raft suddenly boiled, and a young man with silky black hair and alabaster skin emerged from it, dragging something in a stranglehold. A terrifying creature with long tentacles that were as wide as a man's thigh was struggling furiously, trying to free itself. Its spongy flesh was awash with inky black blood.

"Stop fighting, you bastard!"

Sunny gritted his teeth and ignored a tentacle that was wrapped around his neck, exerting enough pressure on it to crush an armored vehicle. Using one hand, he swam toward the raft, climbed aboard, and dragged the Nightmare Creature with him.

Saint silently moved to the opposite side of the Coffer, so that the weight of the abomination did not make it capsize. The crow flew up and landed on her shoulder, staring at the monstrous creature with apprehension.

Sunny pressed the abomination down and barked:

"Stay still!"

He was rather angry.

Yes, he and Saint were enough to slay most of the Nightmare Creatures that would attack them, either from underwater or from the sky. However, capturing one alive… that was a whole different level of trouble!

"Jet, get over here!"

Soul Reaper slowly gathered her limbs, and then sluggishly tried to stand up. After a few tries, she succeeded and stood there for a moment, swaying. Sunny summoned the Cruel Sight and tossed it to her, using his knee to press the abomination into the alloy. Soul Reaper caught the spear and used its shaft to help herself stay upright.

He held the Nightmare Creature down and cursed.

"Hurry the hell up… this thing… is really strong!"

Not to mention that it had more limbs than he did. Immobilizing it was a miserable task.

Jet shambled over, then spun the somber spear and thrust it into the center of the mass of furiously dancing tentacles, using the whole weight of her body to give the strike some force. The silver blade pierced the flesh of the abomination and disappeared inside, causing a river of black blood to flow onto the alloy surface of the raft.

The corpse of Soul Reaper lost balance and fell flat into the puddle of blood. She remained laying there, not paying the convulsing tentacles any attention. Slowly, an eerie smile of satisfaction appeared on the dead body's blood-stained face.

"Ah… that feels better…"

Sunny let go of the slain creature and sent it back into the water with a furious kick. Saint moved back to the middle of the raft, balancing it with her prodigious weight. The crow slid off her shoulder and landed at the edge of the pool of black blood.

It stared at it for a moment, and then cawed excitedly:

"...Soup! Soup!"

Chapter-1063: Lively Corpse

Sunny summoned the Graceless Dusk back and remained motionless for a while, looking at the dark expanse of the ocean. The sunrise in Antarctica was a long affair… by now, the sky was on the precipice of falling into a long period of twilight, but the cold waters still seemed black. After a month or two of dawn, it would be day for about four months, followed by a couple of months of dusk.

There would be much fewer shadows around for close to half a year, which meant that Sunny was going to have a much harder time fighting. Many of his advantages would disappear.

…Provided that the forces of humanity would even be able to last that long, of course.

There was a good chance that they wouldn't, but there was also a good chance that they would.

The situation in East Antarctica was much better than it had been in the Antarctic Center. In fact, it was more or less exactly what the government had hoped for — after the tumultuous first phase of the operation, all the population had been relocated to a number of siege capitals, the soldiers had hunkered down, and people were being slowly carried across the ocean to the other Quadrants.

That process would last until the end of the year, at least.

There were three field armies of the First Evacuation Army currently operating in East Antarctica — which was exactly three times more than the single one that had been sent to the Antarctic Center. There were also two Saints there, one of the government's own and the emissary of the great clan Song. Once Saint Tyris recovered from her wounds, there would be three.

The Second Army was on its way, as well. They would be making

landfall in just a few days, and once that happened, the human forces on the continent would be incredibly bolstered. The Second Army was supposed to be composed of twice as many mundane soldiers, Awakened, and Masters as the First Army had been.

Close to five thousand Awakened had died in the Antarctic Center… but by the end of August, there would be sixty thousand of them defending East Antarctica. Best of all, there was no Winter Beast to suppress all forms of long-range communications there, allowing the army to operate as the well-oiled machine it was supposed to be.

That had to be enough to withstand the onslaught of the Chain of Nightmares for five more months. By then, most of the population would hopefully be evacuated… and if not, there was the winter solstice.

With how rampantly the Spell had been spreading in the Southern Quadrant, the number of Awakened was bound to double, or even triple after the solstice. All the Sleepers created by the Chain of Nightmares would receive the chance to come into their full power.

So, although the forces arrayed against the evacuation effort would continue to grow more dire as time went on, the forces of humanity would swiftly increase, too.

There was a chance.

However… Sunny knew that there was one unpredictable part of the equation that could ruin everything.

The great clans.

Nephis had told him that the Southern Campaign was a perfect battlefield for them to wage their war… and so, there was a large possibility that Song and Valor would clash in East Antarctica, complicating the already dreadful situation.

There was no sense or reason in their insane feud, at least none that Sunny and Neph could see. And yet, the threat posed by the war of great clans was very real.

As Sunny looked at the ocean, his eyes glinted with cold, wrathful

light.

'Those bastards…'

He had not even noticed when his hands turned into fists.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Sunny turned slightly and looked at Jet. She had sat up and was now wiping the Nightmare Creature's blood off her face, looking slightly less corpsely… but only slightly. She was still a far cry from the fearsome Soul Reaper he knew.

Sunny lingered for a moment, then said evenly:

"Just thinking about the future."

Jet studied him for a bit.

"Really? Because you look like you're about to dive back into the water, this time to butcher a few abominations just for fun."

She sighed, then said wistfully:

"Why did you throw that one off the raft, anyway? We didn't even retrieve the soul shards."

Sunny scoffed.

"What do we need soul shards for? You can't use them, and neither can I. That thing, meanwhile, was flooding the whole place with its rotten blood. We don't even have a rag to wipe it off."

Indeed, soul shards were useless for both of them. Sunny needed shadow fragments, which could only be received by slaying enemies of equal or higher Rank, while Soul Reaper could only replenish her essence and strengthen her core by killing living things.

In the outside world, a single soul shard was worth a hefty sum of credits, but here on the raft, Sunny would have given a hundred of them just for a mop.

'Well… maybe not a hundred.'

Sunny sighed, then returned to his chair and sat down.

He was growing hungry, too…

Jet stood up, shakily walked out of the puddle of blood, and lowered herself to the alloy surface of the raft. Her eyes had regained a hint of their usual iciness.

She remained silent for a bit, then said hoarsely:

"You've been in a dismal mood this whole time."

Sunny looked at her with amusement.

Not only was he amused by the fact that she had apparently had enough presence of mind to pay attention to his moods, with all that crawling around and trying to kill him, but the statement itself was more than a little redundant.

How else was he supposed to feel after what had happened in Falcon Scott? Millions of people had died. The members of his cohort had died. And even before that… the First Irregular Company had been all but wiped out. Considering everything, Sunny thought that he had handled himself pretty well in the past week.

He smiled darkly.

"Yeah? And why do you think that is?"

Jet sighed, then looked away.

"Does it matter what I think? I understand… believe me, I do. In fact, I might just understand it better than you. But, Sunny, do you want me to be honest?"

He stared at her silently, then shrugged.

"I guess."

Usually, statements like this were followed by something unpleasant.

She looked at the dark waves and shook her head.

"I think that you have maybe forgotten who you are, and where you came from. I am only saying it because I went through the same thing, many years ago. When I left the outskirts, I was tempted to forget the truth of things, too. And I did... for a little while. But the world has a way of reminding you what it really is, and what you should expect from it.

Sunny… don't grow soft. You, of all people, should know better."

Sunny looked at her, his face unmoving. After a few moments, he shook his head.

"We are not in the outskirts anymore. And we are not the same people anymore."

A pale grin slowly appeared on Soul Reaper's lips.

"...That is true, too."

She lied down and stared at the sky, silent.

After a while, though, Jet said:

"Maybe you are right. Maybe people like us have to change, too… inflexible things are the most brittle, after all. But look around. With how things are going, the whole world just might end up like the outskirts soon. What are we supposed to do then?"

Sunny laughed.

"I'm the last person you should be asking for advice. What are we supposed to do? I have no idea. I don't even know what we are supposed to do tomorrow, let alone in the vague future. Let's just keep things simple. Today, we need to survive.

Tomorrow, too. After that… we'll see. It would already be nice if we get the privilege of having a choice in the matter."

Jet turned her head and looked at him seriously. Then, she said in a solemn tone:

"I can't survive, though. I'm already dead."

They stared at each other silently for a few moments, then both laughed.

The raft continued to drift on the cold waves. From time to time, Saint would raise her bow and send a black arrow into the dark water. Every time she did, the Spell would whisper into Sunny's ear, announcing a kill. Other times, he would have to dive into the ocean himself and help her deal with the attacking abominations.

Shadow fragments slowly trickled into his soul.

The next day, Sunny procured another Nightmare Creature for Jet to kill. And the day after that, one more.

On the third day, her crow returned from its scouting trip much sooner than usual, announcing that it had seen land. Not long after that, they saw a dark line on the horizon.

On the fourth day, the raft finally reached the inhospitable shore, and the two of them set foot on solid ground again.

East Antarctica welcomed them with cold winds, dim twilight, and the familiar call of the whispering Nightmare Gates.

Chapter-1064: East Antarctica

East Antarctica was many times larger than the Antarctic Center, both in terms of territory and population. Its landscape was also much more varied, with vast plains, long mountain chains, and numerous lakes that ranged from relatively small to those that were as large as seas.

Somewhere out there, in that cold expanse, twenty-one siege capitals were currently enduring the onslaught of Nightmare Creatures. Each of them was comparable to Falcon Scott in size, and there were close to nine hundred million people protected by their walls.

Sunny was looking into the distance, feeling a bit uncomfortable. In front of him was a vast plain that stretched all the way to the horizon, covered in snow. It was littered by giant boulders that stood like solemn monuments to the ancient past, and cut by countless deep canyons. Here and there, hordes of abominations could be seen, flowing across the plain like dark rivers.

After months spent in the mountainous Antarctic Center, it was strange to be able to see that far. The world was broad and shrouded in dim twilight, looking quite surreal. Sunny felt… exposed.

"What a bleak sight."

It was still better than the poisoned wilderness of the other continents. He could freely breathe here, at least. There were also much fewer scars left by the destructive wars of the Dark Times here, although there were some. He could see the skeletal remains of massive war machines and the ruins of destroyed towns far in the distance, all covered with snow.

With a sigh, Sunny turned around. Behind him was a slope leading to the ocean shore. Jet had just finished climbing the slope and stopped near him, breathing heavily. She still looked like a dead woman

walking… but at least she was breathing again. That alone made her less unnerving.

Soul Reaper remained silent for a few moments, then cursed quietly.

"There are still Gates near us."

Indeed, the Call was still too strong for them to escape into the Dream Realm. She studied the plain before looking at him.

"Do you have a working communicator?"

Sunny shifted awkwardly, then gestured to the Graceless Dusk.

"This is a Transcendent armor, you know. It has many wonderful enchantments. Sadly… one thing it doesn't have is pockets. I used to carry a few useful items inside a spatial storage Memory, but those were all destroyed by the Heart of Darkness. So, no. I don't have a communicator on me."

Indeed, the Covetous Coffer was more or less empty now. Sunny had spent most of his supplies during the escape to Falcon Scott, and what little remained was then obliterated by the dark beetles. The only thing they had not been able to destroy were the spools of diamond thread from the Ebony Tower.

Jet sighed.

"Pity. Mine was frozen solid. We can't even contact Army Command, then."

Sunny watched the distant hordes of Nightmare Creatures for a while.

"Well, then we just have to keep moving deeper inland until we find a safe spot to use our anchors."

Soul Reaper grimaced… which looked quite frightening, considering her current state. She lingered for a few seconds, then shook her head.

"Moving inland… it won't be easy. This place is in a much better state

than the Antarctic Center was, but that's just inside the siege capitals. Out here in the wilderness, the Nightmare Creatures still reign unopposed. You know better than anyone how hard it is to traverse an environment like this."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Luckily, we don't need to travel for three thousand kilometers. And there are no civilians slowing us down. Hell, there's not even a murderous sea to flood the entire world every night. Come on… it's going to be like a picnic."

He called, and a moment later, a stygian black steed rose from the shadows. Nightmare snorted, ominous red flames burning in his eyes. The stallion's adamantine horns glinted dully in the bleak twilight of the early dawn.

Sunny summoned the Overpriced Saddle and went about strapping it on the black courser. As he did, Jet looked at him with dead eyes.

After a while, she suddenly said:

"By the way. I never asked… but how the hell did you end up being Mongrel? That doesn't make any sense!"

She paused, and then shook her head.

"Actually, scratch that. In retrospect, it makes too much sense. We even met once, when that Gate manifested in NQSC… ah. I feel embarrassed now…"

Sunny coughed.

"I just wanted to train peacefully in the Dreamscape. Who knew people would make such a ruckus about me learning a few battle styles? This whole thing went out of control really fast. Ugh… believe it or not, I actually wanted to use the Mongrel persona to stay under the radar. That plan… yeah, it failed spectacularly."

Jet laughed, her voice sounding hoarse and disturbing.

"Stay under the radar? You call challenging Morgan of Valor staying

under the radar?"

He winced.

"Well… I might have gotten a little greedy. Once or twice. But hey, at least I got a very good bow out of it. It's still my best ranged Memory — those Valor forgemasters really know what they're doing, huh?"

Soul Reaper shook her head.

"You're not too bad yourself, Sunny. I… still can't believe that you can craft Memories. Do you know how rare Aspects that allow Awakened to create Memories are? There are very few such Awakened outside of Valor, and even those usually only work for the powerful Legacy clans."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments. By that point, there was nothing really preventing him from sharing his insights into sorcery with Jet — they had already learned a lot of each other's secrets, so one more wasn't going to make a difference.

But it would be a long conversation. If he explained that his ability to create and modify Memories had not come from his Aspect, but rather from an Attribute, he would have to explain what Blood Weave was, which in turn would require him to explain much more. He didn't feel like it.

The knowledge would not help Soul Reaper, anyway… or anyone else, for that matter. As far as Sunny knew, his ability to see and interact with spellweave was unique.

Instead, Sunny glanced at Jet and asked:

"What's so special about that Morgan, anyway? How strong is she?"

Soul Reaper sighed.

"Morgan… she is strong. No Master is weak, but you need to understand that there are Masters, and then there are Masters, Sunny. Legacies are trained from childhood to be monstrous fighters. And that's just those from lesser clans. Those from the great clans — well, you can imagine. Morgan is not just any member of clan Valor,

either.

She is their princess. You should know by now who her father is."

Sunny's face darkened. He finished dealing with the saddle and crossed his arms.

"What about you, then? Are you stronger than Morgan?"

Jet stared at him with her hollow, dead eyes. A corner of her mouth twitched upward.

"Me? Maybe… probably not. If we had to fight, I would most likely lose. Not because I am weaker, just because Morgan has the vast resources of Valor behind her. Memories, Echoes, soul shards… you can't imagine how much power the great clans have hoarded over the decades. People like us don't have the same foundation.

So I wouldn't want to fight one of their heirs, if there's an option not to. That goes for your friend Song Seishan, as well."

He scoffed.

"It's a bit of a stretch to call us friends. And I think you are selling yourself short. I fought a couple of Masters from Valor, you know? They're not that tough."

Soul Reaper grinned.

"Oh, really? How come you ended up stuck in the waking world for half a year, then?"

Sunny stared at her for a moment.

"Good point."

With that, he jumped into the saddle, looked at Jet from above, and offered her a hand.

"Come on. Climb up."

She hesitated, prompting Sunny to raise an eyebrow.

"What? What's wrong?"

Jet cleared her throat.

"What do you mean, what's wrong? I don't know how to ride a horse. Why would I know how to ride a horse? I've never ridden one! I've never even seen one, before your Echo."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then suddenly laughed.

That laugh surprised him, because he had not thought himself capable of laughing after Falcon Scott.

"Gods… you don't need to ride anything. I'll control the horse, you just sit in front of me and don't fall off. I'm sure you can handle that much, at least."

Jet sighed, then grabbed his hand and jumped up. Nightmare exhaled loudly through his nostrils, confused as to why a corpse was sitting on top of him. Shadow God was also the God of Death, though, so the shadow steed must have been accustomed to such things happening.

Or not. In any case, he would have to deal with it.

Jet looked down nervously.

"Sunny… how fast is your horse, exactly?"

He smirked.

"Pretty fast."

With that, Sunny sent Nightmare forward. Soul Reaper would have yelped, but she was still having trouble breathing. So, all she produced was a stiffled hiss.

The nightmarish steed carried a dead woman and a divine shadow as it raced across the snow-covered plain, moving deeper into the cold expanse of a doomed continent.

Chapter-1065: Reaper

Nightmare was flying across the twilight plain, ignoring all obstacles. He cut through the snow, maneuvered between giant boulders, crested hills, and jumped across deep canyons, his steel hooves sending sparks flying from the weathered stone. The dark destrier was swift like a shadow, moving with innate grace and incredible speed.

Sunny was sitting in the saddle, holding Jet. She was basically in his embrace… in the past, being so close to her would have made his blood boil, but right now, he did not feel anything. Not just because Soul Reaper was cold and lifeless like a corpse, but also because his heart was just as cold, and just as lifeless.

He did not feel much of anything right now, except for deep, dark rancor.

There was no time to, either. Sunny might have joked about how this journey would be akin to a picnic, but in truth, their situation was still dire. East Antarctica was teeming with Nightmare Creatures, and he was not conceited enough to think himself capable of slaughtering entire hordes of them.

Sunny knew that he was strong, but he also knew the limitations of his strength. He had just been taught a bitter lesson on that topic by the Winter Beast, after all.

Right now, his best friends were caution and speed.

His shadows were scouting ahead, searching for Nightmare Creatures that lay in wait. Some he would avoid, some he would escape from by relying on how swift Nightmare was. Steering clear of the migrating hordes was not too hard, but the smaller swarms and solitary abominations were a challenge.

Still, Sunny had not been forced to summon Saint yet, let alone enter battle himself.

They traversed a good distance, then hid in a deep ravine, waiting for a large horde to move away. After the river of monsters was gone, Nightmare dashed forward once again. Rinse and repeat.

Finding a safe spot to enter the Dream Realm was proving to be more difficult than he had thought. There were places where the pull of the Call was not strong enough to disrupt their anchors, but all of them were crawling with the Nightmare Creatures. Slaying the abominations was not out of the question, but Sunny felt reluctant to create a lot of noise.

Who knew what else would be attracted by the sounds of a battle?

And so, further and further they went.

Eventually, he had to admit that solving their problem was not going to be a fast affair. As such, Sunny had to change his tactics.

He had not eaten in a long time, and Jet was losing essence. They had to hunt.

Sunny spent some time finding a swarm of Nightmare Creatures that was sufficiently small and isolated. After that, he commanded Saint to put an arrow into each abomination and slow them down with the [Burden of Peace] enchantment of the black bow.

Then, Sunny set Soul Reaper on the beasts and watched from the shadows as she butchered them.

Jet was still weak and low on essence. However, the creatures were merely Awakened, and weighed down by the soul arrows on top of that. He was there to interfere should something go wrong, as well.

Sunny was confident that his dead companion would be able to handle the swarm.

And, indeed, she did.

To conserve her essence, Jet shunned summoning any Memories and

attacked the abominations with her bare hands. However, as Sunny quickly found out, Soul Reaper was a terror to behold even while weakened and unarmed.

When she struck the abominations, her hands simply passed through their flesh, directly shattering the soul cores. But more than that, Jet was already dead — her body could still be damaged, and she would perish if it was entirely destroyed, but she was also not plagued by many of the weaknesses that most living beings shared.

She could not bleed to death, but could ignore wounds that would cripple or kill any human. Jet was able to dismiss even the most severe internal injuries, continuing to fight without ever slowing down. Even if her lungs were crushed and her heart was pierced, she would simply continue to kill.

Not even crushing Soul Reaper's skull would stop her. As long as she absorbed enough essence, her dead body would eventually heal, or rather, restore itself.

Faced with such an unstoppable monster… even Sunny would feel a hint of dread.

'Good thing we're on the same side.'

In the end, it did not take long for Jet to slaughter the small swarm of Awakened abominations. She killed them with her bare hands, regaining a little strength with each kill. Throughout all of this, her face remained unnervingly calm, like that of someone focused on a boring chore. Then, a disturbing little smile appeared on it.

Sunny was forced to remember his first conversation with Teacher Julius. Back then, the old man had called Jet a murderous savage and a psychopathic killer. Sunny used to think that people were prejudiced against Jet because of her background, but now, knowing what he knew…

He could see how strangers could have come to the conclusion that Soul Reaper enjoyed killing simply for the sake of killing. Very few people knew that she needed to constantly absorb essence to survive, after all.

And who wouldn't be unsettled after witnessing something like this?

When the last of the Nightmare Creatures fell to the ground, Jet straightened and closed her eyes for a moment, exhaling with satisfaction. She looked like a fiend that had just crawled from the depths of hell — awash in blood, body riddled with ghastly wounds, and eerily beautiful despite all that.

Shaking his head, Sunny emerged from the shadows and went about dressing down some of the abominations to collect meat. At the same time, Saint started salvaging soul shards.

Jet remained motionless for a while, then looked at him. There was some vitality now in her eyes.

She smiled, and said:

"What are we doing now?"

Sunny looked at her somberly.

"Now, go wash yourself. You might be dead, but I'm not. I can still smell things…"

Chapter-1066: Faithful Imitation

Some time later, they were hidden in a small cave at the bottom of a deep canyon, sitting in front of a fire. A piece of monster meat was roasting on it, filling the cave with a delicious smell. Sunny was a bit sullen, because it had taken all his knowledge of wilderness survival to make the small fire… snowy reaches of Antarctica were not exactly the best place to search for fuel.

He had almost been forced to use the divine flames of the Cruel Sight to cook, which would inevitably result in an atrociously burned dinner for him.

Currently, Sunny was passing time by trying to play a simple melody on a flute made of emerald bone. Kai would have probably become ill if exposed to his musical talent, but Jet didn't seem to mind.

She stared at the fire, flames reflecting in her icy blue eyes. After a while, she suddenly said:

"...I can smell things too, you know. When I am sufficiently full of essence. My Aspect might only give me a semblance of life, but it's a faithful imitation."

Sunny lowered the emerald flute and looked at her gloomily.

"What I'm hearing… is that you want to rob me of some of this meat. Right?"

Jet lingered for a moment, then grinned.

"Right. That was exactly what I meant. I am hungry, too."

He sighed, then hung more meat above the fire.

"Should have just said so. Gods… what is up with me always ending

up with gluttonous women? It just never ends…"

Sunny turned the meat over. After a while, following a whim, he asked:

"How did you end up with such a wicked Flaw, anyway? I thought mine was bad… but if I survived the First Nightmare only to be killed by the Spell during the assessment, I would have been pretty upset."

He really did not understand how it would work.

Jet laid down, staring at the stone roof of the cave. She sighed, then shrugged slightly.

"No, it wasn't during the assessment. Actually, I did not survive the First Nightmare. I was young, and weak, and frightened. And so… I died."

Soul Reaper turned her head and looked at him across the fire.

"But I didn't remain completely dead. I crawled out of the grave, somehow, and finished the trial. I guess the role I played in the Nightmare, or maybe my innate Attribute, created the possibility of something like that happening… it had to be an infinitely small possibility, though, because the Spell seemed rather impressed with the result. Otherwise, it wouldn't have given me a Supreme Aspect."

Sunny did not answer, considering what he heard. It made sense… he had also made something nearly impossible happen during the First Nightmare. If he had not been sent into the body of a temple slave, Shadow God would not have responded to his unintentional call. And if he did not have the [Fated] Attribute, he would have never unwittingly climbed on that altar, most likely.

Many things had come together to create the possibility... he had been the one to grasp it, though. Anyone else would have failed.

Sunny looked at Jet silently, thinking about her Flaw. What would happen if he gave her Weaver's Mask? Would she come back to life?

In his heart, he knew the answer. After learning about Weaver, the Spell, and the vicissitudes of fate, Sunny developed an intuition about

these things. Jet would indeed come back to life… but her soul would remain shattered. And like all living beings with broken souls, she would instantly die.

This time, forever.

Her cruel Flaw, mockingly, was the only thing that allowed her to exist.

What about his own Flaw?

Sunny tried to imagine the life he would have had if not for the inability to lie. Would it have been easier? Would it have been harder?

He would not have become enslaved, that was for sure. But he also would have never gotten close to other people, choosing to lie and manipulate them instead of trusting them, out of fear of being rejected and betrayed.

And for that reason, he would have probably died a long time ago. Or at least turned into something ugly and twisted.

Was that the lesson he was supposed to learn?

'Weaver… you hypocrite. Weren't you yourself the master of lies?'

Sunny shook his head and concentrated on not burning the meat. These philosophical questions were a waste of time. He would still choose to get rid of his Flaw in an instant, if he could.

Jet sighed, breaking the silence.

"Actually, learning my Flaw was not the hardest part. The hardest part was surviving the time between the Nightmare and the solstice. As you can imagine, it's not easy for a Sleeper to find things to kill before entering the Dream Realm. I ended up having to ask for help… and asking for help ended up costing me a lot."

Sunny shifted slightly.

"Who did you ask?"

She chuckled.

"Who do you think? Just like you, I've been invited to the Academy after becoming a Sleeper. And just like you, I've been asked for the details of my Aspect… on a voluntary basis, of course. But what would an ignorant kid from the outskirts know? I told them everything, and from that moment, they had a wonderful leash to keep me on."

Jet remained silent for a few moments.

"...That is fine, though. Even without it, I would have chosen the same. I'm happy with how things turned out. Still…"

She grew quiet, and then added wistfully:

"It would have been nice, to have had more of a choice."

Sunny did not speak for a while. Eventually, he said:

"Yeah. It would have been nice."

With that, he judged that the meat was ready and took it off the fire.

"Here, your dinner is ready."

They concentrated on the food, content to be safe for the moment, with something tasty to eat.

Sunny could vividly remember the times when eating anything, let alone actual meat, had been a cause for celebration. Jet could, too.

Those times were gone, and no matter how complicated and hard their lives had become…

Sitting in a damp cave located in the depths of a dying continent, Sunny stared at the fire and thought:

'...I guess it's an improvement.'

Chapter-1067: With Your Shield

Soon, Sunny and Jet continued their journey. The landscape of East Antarctica remained the same, and so did the dangers they faced. The two of them traveled across the desolate plain, sometimes avoiding the Nightmare Creatures, sometimes engaging in short and furious battles.

Sunny felt a little bit numb, and was glad to have a task to focus on. With all his attention concentrated on keeping them alive, he had no time for unnecessary thoughts, which suited him just fine.

Jet, meanwhile, was slowly recovering her powers. The more abominations she killed, the less like a corpse she looked. At some point, she allowed herself to summon a few Memories, and was now wearing a light suit of armor that was made of black, lusterless leather.

Now that she wielded a weapon, her lethality had soared, too.

For Sunny, it was fascinating to watch Jet slowly come back to life. Her eyes were once again the familiar icy blue, her movements becoming as swift, murderous, and purposeful as they had been before. This was the fearsome Soul Reaper he knew — she might not have reached her peak condition yet, but she did not resemble a shambling corpse anymore, either.

Most interesting of all, her lifeless shadow had regained its vitality. By now, he would have never suspected that the person in front of him was not actually alive.

A few days passed, and then a few more. Two whole weeks had passed since the destruction of Falcon Scott. They had spent half of that time crossing the strait, and half traversing the snowy plain.

The plain was as inhospitable and vast as ever.

...Sunny made Nightmare stop, waiting for his shadows to assess the size of a distant horde of Nightmare Creatures. These past few days, there had been more and more abominations around, all moving in the same direction. Weaving between them was growing harder.

Somewhat bored, he shifted in the saddle and asked:

"Hey… do you think the government considers us dead?"

Jet, who was sitting in front of him, turned her head and gave him an amused look. Sunny sighed.

"No pun intended."

He knew that his friends had to be aware that he was fine — Nephis could see his runes, after all, and she would have informed the rest. However, being pronounced dead by the government was a bothersome affair. His merchant license would have been revoked, for example, which would put Aiko and the Brilliant Emporium in a tight spot. His home could be auctioned off, too.

Jet chuckled.

"I don't think so. They have ways to know such things — the diviners, for example. We were probably marked as missing in action. If anyone even had time to do the paperwork."

Sunny wanted to continue the conversation, but then fell silent, a slight frown appearing on his face. Soul Reaper raised an eyebrow.

"What is it?"

He shook his head.

"Shh. Listen."

At that moment, the wind carried over the sound of distant thunder. It sounded like a rainstorm was raging somewhere far away, but Sunny had spent too much time with the army not to recognize it.

The two of them exchanged a meaningful glance. Jet smiled.

"Railguns."

Indeed, the thunderous sound could only be produced by the massive armaments.

Commanding Nightmare to turn, Sunny sent his steed in the direction where the thunder had come from. The black stallion flew across the desolate plain, eventually cresting a tall hill.

In front of them was a vast lake. In the dim twilight, its surface seemed restless and grey. The shield of ice covering the lake had long been broken, with many gargantuan carcasses floating in the cold water like dark islands. Smaller Nightmare Creatures were swarming around them, greedily devouring the flesh of the fallen giants.

On the other side of the lake, tall alloy walls rose from the shore, with thousands of armaments unleashing a devastating barrage of tungsten rounds on the encroaching mass of abominations. Sunny could even discern the small shapes of soldiers and Awakened on the battlements.

A long sigh escaped from his lips.

"A siege capital."

Summoning the Sin of Solace, Sunny closed his eyes for a moment. Then, he sent Nightmare galloping down the hill.

The black steed rushed toward the lake, surrounded by a tide of moving shadows.

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Returning from the dead had turned out to be much more chaotic than Sunny expected… and fighting through the horde of Nightmare Creatures to reach the siege capital was not the most tumultuous part. He was actually accustomed to things like that.

The reactions of the people inside the stronghold were much more intense. At first, the commander of the city defenses seemed polite, but unfriendly — after all, the sudden appearance of two Ascended outside the walls during a fierce battle had put a lot of pressure on

him.

Fields of fire had to be rearranged, a safe corridor created… perhaps his soldiers would even have to sortie to protect the unexpected guests. However, the latter measure had not been needed. Sunny fought his own way to the wall, and then scaled it himself.

And when the Master in charge learned that the two Ascended had come from the Antarctic Center, his demeanor completely changed.

"Falcon Scott? B—but…"

The man stared at them with wide eyes for a moment. Then, something akin to joyous pride ignited in them.

Sunny did not really know what the Master was feeling so proud about, but at least the unfriendliness immediately disappeared.

"Gods… great! This is great! I need to inform the… no, wait. Are you guys wounded? Do you need medical attention? Crap, what am I saying… wait, Antarctic Center?

Then you are Soul Reaper Jet? Ascended Jet, ma'am… of course, you would make it!"

The news about the annihilation of the Antarctic Center field army must have already spread through the Quadrant, so the sudden appearance of two Ascended survivors had an explosive effect. The soldiers, who had been depressed and despondent about the fate of their comrades, were all suddenly full of joy and ardor.

It was as though their own siblings had returned alive from beyond the grave.

Sunny had not experienced being stared at so intently even when masquerading as Mongrel.

The two of them were promptly brought to the local government headquarters and showered with attention… especially Jet. From what Sunny could understand, the government Saint stationed in East Antarctica was coming to the siege capital to welcome her back personally.

Sunny was soon going to meet the Saint, too.

After a short debriefing, during which the government agents could not stop staring at him, he could finally exhale and relax a little.

'That was strangely exhausting.'

Sunny spoke to Jet, agreeing to meet the next morning, and then spent a little time in the living quarters assigned to him. He enjoyed a warm shower, a scrumptious meal, and some peace and quiet.

Peace and quiet… it felt so strange, to not have to fight for his life, and the lives of millions of other people, without a reprieve. He wondered how long that peace would last.

Eventually, Sunny placed a tether inside his room and quietly slipped out of the waking world.

He went to visit the Ivory Tower.

Chapter-1068: Changed Man

On a beautiful island of ancient trees and emerald grass, a lone figure suddenly appeared out of thin air. It was a young man with alabaster skin, wearing a simple tunic of fine black silk. He remained motionless for a few moments, then walked to the edge of the island and froze there, looking down.

If not for the wind playing with the young man's black hair, he would have looked like an exquisite statue.

The Ivory Island had changed a bit in the past few months. The great pagoda itself was the same, of course, but the comely wooden buildings created by the Fire Keepers now resembled a small, peaceful village that blended harmoniously into the landscape. The ancient trees of the grove now had fruit hanging from their branches, each looking ripe and delicious.

The white bones of the ancient dragon were still bathed in sunlight, and a graceful ship was still swaying on the placid surface of the clear lake.

There was one big change that startled Sunny a lot, though, pulling him out of his reverie.

'What the hell…'

Looking down, he did not see the familiar abyssal darkness of the Sky Below. Instead, he saw a mosaic of flying islands, all connected by colossal chains, slowly floating by.

The Ivory Island was moving.

Although the movement was very slow, it had already left the empty expanse of the Tear behind, and was now drifting through the clouds toward the southern border of the Chained Isles.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Since when can this thing move?'

He lingered for a while, studying the landscape below, then walked along the edge of the Ivory Island.

It seemed that many things had changed while he was in Antarctica.

Soon, Sunny reached the waters of the clear lake, which glinted and shone with the reflected sunlight. There was a stone bench near the shore, and a familiar figure sitting on it with a fishing rod in her hand.

Tall, attractive, brimming with vitality… Effie was relaxing in the sun and watching the lake.

Sunny walked closer and remained silent for a while. Eventually, he said:

"There's actually fish in that lake?"

Effie shrugged lazily.

"Who knows? That's what I'm trying to find out. Hopefully! I developed a taste for fish… and sea monsters… after being stuck on a ship for an entire month."

Then, she suddenly froze, and slowly turned around.

Effie's hazel eyes shone with glee.

"Sunny?! It's you?!"

He smirked.

"Who else would it… argh! Gods! Put me down, you savage idiot!"

The huntress had instantly swept him into a crushing hug, and considering their difference in height, Sunny felt his feet leaving the ground. His voice was full of righteous indignation:

"I said… gods, don't you have any modesty?! Let go of me!"

Effie exploded with laughter and put him down… and it was a good thing, too. Sunny was this close to using the [Feather of Truth] to turn himself as heavy as a huge chunk of marble. He only hesitated because that might have had no effect on her.

"When did you arrive?! No, wait… where the hell are you?! Neph told us that you are alive, but the news from the Antarctic Center… doofus, are you really alright? What happened?"

Sunny gave her a resigned look, then shook his head.

"Just now. East Antarctica. I guess. As for what happened…"

He sighed.

"Let me think for a moment.

I went through six thousand kilometers of abomination-infested mountains, received a couple of medals, traversed an endless tunnel full of elemental darkness, got killed by a titan, killed that titan back, led a convoy of tens of thousands of refugees to safety, rode a Saint into the depths of the ocean to fight a Corrupted Terror, killed that Terror, got blown up, then killed some more Nightmare Creatures, then lost to a different Titan, crossed the strait on a raft, rode a horse all the way to the nearest siege capital… that pretty much covers it, I guess.

Oh, I also learned how to play the flute. A little."

Sunny paused, then looked at Effie nonchalantly:

"And what's new with you?"

She stared at him for a moment, then grinned, wrapped her arm around his shoulder, and pulled him toward the tower.

"I see! So, the usual. Don't think that you're getting out of really telling us what happened, though… we've been worried sick, you know! Kai almost had a heart attack right before we disembarked in East Antarctica, when the news of what happened in Falcon Scott reached us! Even Princess seemed a bit shaken… I swear to the dead gods, I almost saw her having a facial expression.

Come, let's find the rest of the guys…"

Sunny estimated his chances of struggling free of Effie's hold as moderate, but then just relaxed and allowed himself to be led toward the Ivory Tower. That was why he had come here, after all, to speak with the other members of the cohort. He needed to share a lot of practical knowledge with Kai and Effie, as well as speak with Nephis and Cassie about the great clans…

But more than that, he simply wanted to see them. There was a lot of darkness and confusion in his heart, but his friends… his cohort… despite all the complicated matters between them, they were like a small island of stability in the chaotic, unpredictable, deadly world they were all living in.

He had missed them all.

Even though, perhaps, he shouldn't have.

The four months Sunny had spent in Antarctica changed a lot of things, making some seem unimportant, and some more significant than they used to be.

He shook his head.

"Fine, fine… I'm coming. Can you let me go now?"

Sunny sighed.

'At least she did not joke about the Graceless Dusk…'

At that moment, Effie gave him a mischievous look.

"Doofus, I couldn't help but notice… what a nice dress you have…"

He gritted his teeth.

"Tunic. It's a tunic. A Transcendent armor-type Memory which is not a dress, but a tunic. Are you blind or what?!"

Chapter-1069: Secrets of the Island

The great hall of the Ivory Tower made Sunny shiver, just like the last time he had seen it. It was bathed in bright sunlight that poured through tall and narrow windows. A circle of chains lay in the middle of the hall — that was the Gateway.

There was no one here, but Effie pulled Sunny to a staircase that led to the underground level of the tower. Its roots were deep, seemingly reaching into the very heart of the island. That stairwell spiraled along the outer wall of the pagoda, and there was a tapestry of beautiful carvings on the ivory stone.

The carvings told the stories of the golden age of the Kingdom of Hope, long before it had been destroyed by the Lord of Light.

'Wait… I don't think there was a way down before? Was it hidden?'

Confused, Sunny silently followed Effie.

Eventually, the two of them reached a vast circular chamber at the bottom of the stairwell. Sunny had never been here before, but expected it to be similar to the lowest level of the Ebony Tower… and indeed, it was. However, it was also entirely different.

The duplicate tower created by Nether was full of darkness, and there was a ghastly mountain of discarded mannequins occupying the center of its underground level. This chamber, however, was suffused with light. There was a vast and inconceivably complicated runic circle carved into the floor of the chamber, and within it…

Sunny stared, not even noticing the two people studying the circle. His body shivered slightly.

"...Is that?"

Floating in the air at the center of the chamber was a rough, radiant crystal. It was larger than Sunny, and gave him a feeling of sublime, awesome, indescribable power. The crystal was like a miniature sun, flooding the underground hall with soft light. Reality itself seemed to ripple and shine around it.

It was like nothing Sunny had ever seen.

A familiar voice answered, pulling him out of his astonishment:

"Yes. From what we can tell… this is a divine soul shard."

He slowly turned his head and looked at Cassie, who was sitting in front of the runic circle, surrounded by notebooks, etchings, and writing implements. She was wearing simple jeans and a white t-shirt, her pale gold hair gathered in a messy knot bun.

Sunny lingered for a moment, not knowing what to say.

"A divine…"

At that moment, however, a different voice interrupted him.

"Sunny!"

He looked up, only now noticing Kai, who was hovering high above the runic circle, near the tall ceiling of the chamber. The archer was already descending, and with considerable speed, at that.

'Oh, no…'

Before Sunny could react, he was subjected to another hug.

"Gods, Sunny! You had us all worried!"

He gently struggled out of Kai's embrace and met his friend's blinding smile with a pale one of his own.

"Ah… sorry. I guess I'm just a worrisome person. I only died once in the past couple of months, though, so you needn't have worried…"

Then, Sunny looked past the startled archer, stared at the radiant crystal, and took a deep breath.

"Anyone want to explain to me what is going on?"

Cassie stood up, sighed, and massaged her knees. Then, she gave him a soft smile.

"I am glad that you are back too, Sunny."

With that she took a few steps back and gestured to the floor of the circular chamber.

"Take a look at that."

He looked down, only now paying attention to the runic circle carved into the white stone. The weave of runes was vast, complicated… and possessed a disturbing familiarity. Sunny frowned.

'What is that sickening feeling?'

Then, he mentally scaled the runes to many times their size and tilted his head a little. The runes… were very similar in style and shape to those of the Red Colosseum. Just looking at them reminded him of the harrowing months he had spent in the cage below the arena.

'Hope's sorcery?'

Cassie nodded.

"Indeed. We continued to explore the Tower after you left, and eventually unlocked the path to this chamber. Our reaction was more or less the same as yours."

She shook her head.

"The Ivory Island holds more secrets than we thought. Well… Nephis will probably be able to explain it better. In any case, we quickly realized that these runes resembled the ones you had encountered in the ancient theater, so the Fire Keepers went on an expedition to the western edges of the Chained Isles.

The Red Colosseum has long turned into a ruin, and was teeming with all kinds of dreadful Nightmare Creatures. It took some effort to eradicate them and clear the floor of the arena."

'A ruin? Good...'

Kai nodded.

"Effie and I couldn't participate, because we were tied up settling into our roles in the Second Army. However, since Cassie returned, I've been helping her study the runic circle from time to time… a high vantage point helps see it in its entirety, and so on. We've made a little progress, even!

Mostly because Cassie had spent a lot of time with Noctis and learned many things, especially about that flying ship of his."

She nodded.

"Yes. In fact, I suspect that the enchantments of the ship were derived from some of Desire's creations. There are many similarities. So, after months of study and comparisons, we managed to decipher a tiny portion of the circle. It is not much, but it did allow us to access one of the island's hidden functions."

Sunny just stared at her silently for a few moments. Then, he said:

"Is that why the island is moving?"

Cassie nodded with a small smile.

"Indeed. We are now able to move the Ivory Island… albeit very slowly."

He hesitated for a bit, then shook his head.

"Am I the only one who is freaked out by a divine damned soul shard? It's divine! Where did Hope get a divine soul shard?"

Effie glanced at the radiant crystal and shrugged.

"There were only six gods, but there were plenty of creatures of the

Divine Rank, the former mistress of this tower included. Sometimes they fought side by side, sometimes they fought against each other… well, of course they did. Considering how terrifying this Demon of Desire was, is it so surprising that she had a divine soul shard or two?

In fact… I am kind of disappointed that we didn't find way more incredible treasures in her basement. Makes sense, though… the damned dragon must have cleaned it all out ages ago…"

She glanced up, in the direction where the bones of Sevirax were wrapped around the great pagoda. Kai's face darkened a little.

He sighed.

"Why are we talking about this stuff, anyway? Sunny is finally back! He has to be sick of military rations… let's go, guys! I bet dinner is almost ready."

Sunny gave him a long look.

"...Mind if I stay and drool at that shard a bit longer? I mean… it's a divine soul shard! Can you imagine how much that thing costs?"

Kai shook his head and said, his voice full of resoluteness:

"No. You can't. I am going to feed you, and don't even think about resisting!"

Sunny looked at the radiant crystal one last time and sighed.

"Well. Alright. I guess I can go for a bite…"

Chapter-1070: Dysfunctional Citadel

As they went back up the stairs, Sunny couldn't help but think about what he had seen in the stone chamber at the root of the great pagoda. The circle of runes, the sublime crystal hovering in the middle of it… that had to be the core of Hope's tower, as well as of the whole island. The very heart of the Citadel.

But what was its purpose?

An easy conclusion would be that the divine soul shard was the energy source that powered the enchantments keeping the Ivory Island afloat. But that did not make any sense… the runes had been carved by the Demon of Desire herself, which meant that the enchantments had been created before her kingdom was destroyed.

Back then, it had been simply a prospering land. There had been no islands, let alone flying ones. Come to think of it, Sunny was not entirely clear on how the Kingdom of Hope had become the Chained Isles… had she suspended the remnants of her shattered kingdom above the devouring flames herself, in order to preserve at least some of it, or had it been arranged by Sun God?

There were other questions, too. If the divine soul shard was the heart of the Citadel, was it powering the Gateway? But the Gateway was only created recently, after the Seed of Nightmare had been conquered. The Spell made it appear, not Hope. Had the Spell created entirely new enchantments, or built upon the existing ones?

Cassie had said that there were other functions of the Citadel she had yet to master. What were they, exactly?

Now that Sunny started thinking about it, he realized that he didn't really know much about Citadels. That word just used to describe a

human stronghold built around a Gateway in the Dream Realm. He had visited two — the Sanctuary of Noctis and the Ivory Tower. No, actually, three — the Crimson Spire would have become a Citadel, too, if it had not been destroyed.

Was there perhaps more to the Citadels than he had known? Did all of them have hidden functions?

Sunny glanced at Cassie, who was tracing the stone wall with her fingers as she ascended the stairs.

"I actually learned a bit about Hope's runic sorcery back in the Nightmare. If you want, we can compare notes later."

Cassie turned her head and smiled with some excitement.

"Really? That would be very helpful!"

Sunny sighed. Of course, it would be… neither of them had any hope of truly learning runic sorcery — or Hope's magic, as Noctis had called it — in their lifetime. However, learning how to decipher and use already-existing enchantments was not out of the question.

After all, a person could swing a sword without knowing how to forge it.

Runic sorcery was different from weaving, but perhaps just as ingenious. In the primordial era of the Dream Realm, mortals had only known one type of sorcery — the Sorcery of Names. They were capable of invoking the true names of things to wield great power, but speaking those names aloud was often an impossible task.

Hope, however, had invented the concept of writing and gifted it to humans. With the knowledge of writing, humans learned how to transcribe true names and did not need to speak them aloud anymore. More than that, the names could be bound to material objects through writing, thus granting the invocations permanence… and could also be shaped into songs and phrases.

However, it was still all based on the knowledge of true names — without knowing the meaning of the name, transcribing it would have no effect. And there was no way for either Sunny or Cassie to

learn that in less than a few centuries.

They were both mortals, after all.

So, all they could do was use runic enchantments left behind by someone far more powerful and knowledgeable.

Sunny shook his head slightly, wondering what secrets the Ivory Tower truly held.

They made their way back to the first level, and then went higher. In the past, the Fire Keepers had made their home on the upper levels of the Ivory Tower, but now it was empty — the Awakened following Nephis and Cassie had moved to the wooden village outside.

The second level, the third level, the fourth… finally, they arrived at the fifth, second-to-last level of the pagoda. It was separated into many halls and chambers, some of which had been recently refurbished to serve various purposes. It all resembled the interior of a beautiful, but rather bare-bones manor.

A mouth-watering aroma was coming from a half-open door at the end of one of the corridors. Effie hurried toward it with gleaming eyes.

Behind the door was a brightly lit hall that was made into a kitchen. Sunny noticed that someone had put a lot of effort into either building cooking appliances or bringing them here from the waking world — the latter could only be done by a Master, of course.

Although most advanced technology did not work in the Dream Realm, similar to how it failed in the vicinity of Nightmare Gates, more primitive devices functioned perfectly well. There were expensive, but much more convenient spelltech solutions, too.

So while you couldn't really have something like an electric stove or a refrigerator here, you could have a wood stove or an icebox, as well as analogs that worked on essence.

Sunny also noticed several large crates of cooking ingredients, beverages, and snacks, which had obviously been delivered from the waking world by the members of the cohort.

He did not pay that much attention, though, because there was someone standing in front of the stove, stirring the source of the delicious aroma — a generous amount of fried rice that was being cooked in a bowl-shaped frying pan.

Tall, slender, with beautiful silver hair, and wearing white apron… wait, an apron?

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Hearing their steps, Nephis looked over her shoulder and called out:

"It's almost ready…"

Then, she suddenly tensed and slowly turned around.

Neph's face remained as calm as ever, but there was a hint of agitation in her striking grey eyes.

"...Sunny?"

He remained silent for a moment, then looked past her.

"Sure. You better turn around, though. Don't burn our dinner!"

Chapter-1071: Familiar Role

Nephis stared at Sunny for a couple moments, then briefly glanced at her apron and quietly cleared her throat.

"Right."

She turned around and got back to stirring the rice. A couple seconds later, she added without looking back:

"You'll have to wait for a couple more minutes. And… welcome back, Sunny. Did you make it out of the Antarctic Center alright?"

Sunny wondered how much Changing Star knew about the situation in the Southern Quadrant as he followed Cassie, Effie, and Kai to sit behind a dining table. Settling on a wooden chair… which was far inferior to his own Shadow Chair… he sighed.

"I wouldn't call it "alright". But yes, I made it out. I'm already inside a siege capital in East Antarctica."

Neph's shoulder moved slightly.

"...That's good."

Effie grabbed a few cans of something sugary and refreshing, then pushed one toward Sunny.

"Kai and I spent a whole month in transit, aboard those giant ships. We were in the first batch of the Second Army to arrive, so we've been in East Antarctica for about a week. Gods… I thought the ocean was bad, but Antarctica! I have never seen that many Nightmare Creatures in my life, not even here in the Dream Realm. It's like the two worlds switched places."

Kai nodded somberly.

"Indeed. Even though there are secure evacuation corridors between the inland siege capitals and the harbor strongholds, we had to fight a couple battles just to reach our designated sector. Luckily, there were no casualties."

The Second Army was twice the size of the First Army, so it was going to take two trips for the naval convoys to bring all of it to the Southern Quadrant. Both Effie and Kai were in the first wave of reinforcements, which was why they had made landfall around the time Sunny himself reached East Antarctica.

Sunny looked at them, wondering. East Antarctica was a large place, and it was not a given that their paths would cross until the end of the operation… he really hoped that they would, though.

Effie shook her head.

"Enough about us! What happened to you? You… you look a bit different, Sunny."

He did indeed look slightly different because of the Marble Shell. However, Sunny knew that that was not what Effie meant.

He sighed and took a sip from the can she had given him.

"Well… as you know, I was assigned to the First Irregular Company. In the first month after our contingent of the army made it to the Antarctic Center, things were more or less fine. The field army split into seven divisions, with one remaining in the city of Falcon Scott, while six others moved south to establish six more siege capitals."

Sunny paused.

"I was assigned to the southernmost siege capital, and then went on a mission to retrieve a VIP from a remote research station. That was when everything went from bad to worse. The Chain of Nightmares had gone into overdrive, and three whole titans spawned in the Antarctic Center… including an especially troublesome Corrupted one."

It took a lot to keep his voice from shaking at the mention of the Winter Beast. The others looked at him intently, and Sunny sighed.

"I ended up stuck in that research station for about a month, waiting to be evacuated by a battleship. However, the ship never arrived, and everyone in the settlement was eventually eviscerated by a powerful Terror. My people and I were the only ones to survive. We were in a bit of a predicament, though, because by that point, reaching the nearest siege capital was more easily said than done."

He leaned back, remembering LO49 and the start of the calamitous march north. His face darkened.

"And then we learned that the nearest siege capital had actually already been destroyed. So I had to go to the second nearest one, picking up a few refugees in the process… that was when I got trapped in that weird tunnel. Thanks for helping me out, by the way."

He forced out a smile, looking at Nephis and Cassie. Cassie shook her head.

"Of course. We were quite surprised! The way you delivered the message… very original, to say the least. And, uh… very you! Hopefully, the little kernel of insight I gleaned was of some help."

Sunny chuckled.

"It helped. I still don't know what that thing in the tunnel was, but we managed to escape from it… for a time. Sadly, the second-nearest siege capital also ended up being destroyed, and so, I had to lead the train of refugees all the way back to Falcon Scott. That was… a hell of a journey. But what happened next was even worse.

We held the last siege capital for close to three weeks, and in that time, about ninety percent of civilians were evacuated to East Antarctica."

After saying that, he remained silent for a while. Eventually, Sunny grimaced.

"The remaining ten percent, though, all died. As did millions of people in the other destroyed siege capitals. Saint Tyris — you know her — had been holding back that Corrupted Titan I mentioned. Once she was defeated, the titan swept in and killed everyone. The whole

field army was wiped out. I am hard to kill, so I survived… well, and here I am."

A somber silence settled in the brightly lit hall. Nephis and Cassie did not speak, probably not knowing what to say, and neither did Effie and Kai. The latter two were especially grim, because they were now in Antarctica, too.

So many people had died, and what had happened to Sunny could very easily happen to the two of them, as well.

Eventually, Kai sighed.

"I'm so sorry, Sunny. You've been through a lot."

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment. The heart-wrenching memories of the Antarctic Center clawed at his heart, making him want to surrender to a dark and boundless emotion.

…With a smile, he shook his head.

"We've all been through a lot. On the Forgotten Shore and in our Second Nightmares, we've been through hell after hell. But… it did really feel different, this time. Maybe because I was responsible for other people, and maybe because it was happening right here on Earth, not in some distant place."

With that, Sunny glanced at Effie and Kai, then said, trying to cheer them up:

"You don't have to worry too much, though. Now that the operation is in its second phase, things will calm down a little. East Antarctica is in a much better spot than the Antarctic Center… there are more soldiers, more Awakened, more Saints, and much fewer obstacles in the way.

Sure, it's going to be a tough campaign, and unexpected variables are bound to emerge… but I feel like the worst part is over. With some luck, we will all manage."

He smiled, then secretly threw a glance at Nephis.

She was now a part of one of those unexpected variables. Would Neph have something to say to him?

As if feeling his gaze, Changing Star turned around and walked their way, soon placing plates of fragrant rice and vegetables in front of each member of the cohort.

Her apron had disappeared at some point in the past few minutes.

Sitting down, Nephis pushed the plate with the biggest portion toward Sunny, which caused Effie to stare at her indignantly.

Neph coughed.

"What? Eat, everyone… before it get's cold…"

They turned their attention to the food, and for a while, Sunny felt delightfully at peace.

It was so strange… he had gone through so much, and had changed so much, but now that he was back with his friends, it was so easy to slide into a familiar role — to smile and laugh as if he was the same old Sunny. It felt natural, even if a small, hidden corner of his heart remained dark and cold, untouched by the peaceful warmth of their reunion.

Still, it wasn't a bad feeling.

Allowing himself to relax, Sunny concentrated on the food. It had been a long time since he got to eat something Nephis had cooked.

The fried rice with vegetables was, indeed, much better than military rations.

It was delicious.

Chapter-1072: Brief Levity

The small dinner was very enjoyable for Sunny. In fact, after being under crushing pressure for pretty much the entire past four months, this sudden moment of levity made him feel like he was on the verge of melting into a puddle of jelly.

It was as though the outer edges of his being had been turned into a harsh, rigid shell by the immense strain of the disastrous war, and now that the shell suddenly disappeared, he could not quite remember how to keep himself together without it.

Still, he managed.

The five of them ate and chatted relaxedly, sharing small details about their lives in recent months. Sunny especially had a lot to say.

All of them were experienced combatants, but he now possessed precious knowledge of the intricacies of the type of war Effie and Kai would soon be exposed to.

The Southern Campaign was different from the usual tribulations Awakened faced in the Dream Realm. The terrain was different, the climate was different… even the cycle of day and night was different. More importantly, the forces arranged against them were different, as were the forces on their side.

In Antarctica, Ascended and Awakened had the support of mundane soldiers and modern technology. Sunny had learned a tremendous amount of lessons about how to bring the two together — in no small part because he had commanded a mixed force of Awakened and mundanes in conditions so desperate that anything less than perfect cohesion would have meant death.

Unlike him, who had been a part of a small and exceedingly elite unit, both Kai and Effie were placed in command of large

detachments consisting of rank-and-file soldiers. To them, this practical knowledge was more valuable than gold.

Small things like using fire resistance enchantments to increase the tactical flexibility of MWP flamethrowers, efficiently triaging mundane soldiers that had been infected by the Spell, managing the ammo consumption of the vehicle turrets in relation to the essence consumption of the Awakened — and a thousand more — could only be learned through experience… or being taught by someone with such experience.

Of course, his friends were bright people and immensely talented warriors. In time, they would have reached the same conclusions, but that time could very well cost many lives. That was why Sunny was in a hurry to share his hard-won expertise.

The only problem was that actually going over everything was bound to take way more time than they had… so, at some point, he simply used the [Blessing of Dusk] enchantment of the Graceless Dusk to establish a mental connection and share his insights in a more direct fashion.

Needless to say, his sudden ability to transmit thoughts telepathically startled his friends greatly.

Effie flinched, almost falling from her chair, and looked at him with wide eyes.

"Aaah! What the hell, Sunny?! You're in my head!"

Sunny paused, suddenly realizing that he should have probably warned them before establishing the connection. He chuckled awkwardly.

"Oh… sorry, I should have explained first. One of the enchantments of my tunic… it's a tunic, you troglodyte!... allows me to establish a mental link with other living beings. Don't worry, though, I can't read your thoughts — and in your case, Effie, I wouldn't even want to! Gods, I shudder just imagining what is going on in that depraved head of yours.

In any case, you have to willingly transmit a thought for me to receive it. Imagine it as thinking out loud."

She hesitated for a few moments, then instantly sent over a mental image that made Sunny spit out his drink and glare at her with murder in his eyes.

Effie grinned, then waved a hand.

"Alright, alright. I get it. What a great enchantment!"

With the help of the [Blessing of Dusk], the conversation flowed much faster.

Eventually, though, both Kai and Effie had to leave. They had just arrived at their assigned siege capital, after all, so there was a lot for them to do. In fact, days like this, when all five could freely gather in the Dream Realm together, were bound to be rare until the Antarctica operation was over.

Cassie excused herself, too, returning to the root chamber of the tower to continue studying the runic circle.

Sunny and Nephis were left alone in the sunlit hall.

He hesitated.

Throughout the dinner, Sunny had avoided speaking about the matters that gnawed on him — the war between the great clans and their plans for Antarctica. In fact, he felt reluctant to start that conversation even now.

However, he had already learned the unpleasant lesson of what happened when he postponed important conversations until the last possible moment.

Sunny's relaxed expression slowly changed to one of grim sharpness. Looking at Nephis, he leaned back a little and asked:

"You told me before that Valor and Song would most likely turn the Southern Quadrant into their private battlefield. How sure are you of it now, after four months?"

Neph lingered for a while, her beautiful grey eyes clear and calm. Then, she said:

"I am pretty sure. In fact, it has already been set in stone."

Sunny let out a resentful sigh.

'Damn them!'

He gritted his teeth, staring into the distance with a harsh expression. Suddenly, the shadows in the corners of the hall seemed much darker.

"This is… insanity."

Sunny shook his head, feeling a strong desire to break something.

"This is pure madness, Neph! I've been told that the great clans have long given up on the waking world. Standing aside and watching the lives of hundreds of millions of people be destroyed is already unforgivable. But coming to mess things up even further is just beyond all reason! I just… I just don't understand."

Changing Star looked at him evenly. Then, a strange, joyless smile slowly appeared on her face.

"I can help you with that."

Sunny frowned.

"What exactly do you mean?"

Nephis sighed, then looked away.

"You've done a lot in the past four months, Sunny. Cassie and I might not have gone through as much as you have, but we haven't been idle, either. We've managed to discover a few things… although not as many as I would have liked. After all, it has only been a few months. They don't trust me much, yet."

She paused for a moment.

"This war between Valor and Song has always seemed a little strange. And now, I think I know why. A lot of things still remain unclear, but we did solve the most important mystery."

Changing Star looked at him and said:

"The true reason why the great clans are at war. Do you want me to tell you? That will certainly help you understand."

Chapter-1073: The Fourth Step

Sunny remained silent for a while, looking at Nephis with a somber expression. Eventually, a dark smile appeared on his face.

"Do tell."

Neph sighed, then stood up and started gathering the dirty plates. Her movements were calm and unhurried, as if they had not been discussing matters that could very well decide the fate of the whole world.

"Help me do the dishes?"

Sunny blinked, amused by the mundane banality of her request. He lingered for a moment, then shook his head and went about giving Changing Star a hand. As they cleaned the plates in the cold water produced by either a Memory or the Ivory Tower itself, she started talking:

"I've known for a long time that the great clans — especially Song and Valor — were opposed to each other, despite being outwardly unified. The symptoms of the approaching war were quite apparent, if one knew where to look. However, the reasons for this animosity have always eluded me. Ki Song and Anvil had been comrades once, after all… well, I guess it doesn't really matter.

My father was their comrade, too."

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"Do they really need a reason, though? Power is already reason enough. Both have an unimaginable amount of it, but in my experience, those who possess great power are the ones most greedy for more."

Nephis slowly shook her head.

"Maybe… but they are not fools. This war of theirs is too ill-timed, and too destructive. The great clans stand to lose more from it than they would gain. There are other powers to consider, too — the House of Night, for example.

Even the government, or Asterion, wherever he might be… if both Song and Valor are weakened by the clash, the lesser threats might very well swoop in to finish off the victor."

She paused for a bit.

"So, I suspected there had to be something else at play. And as it turns out, there is — although I only learned of it recently. I still don't know why the hostility between the two great clans has suddenly escalated so much now, of all the times it could have… now seems like a terrible time to go to war. However, I think I do know the true source of their conflict."

Sunny glanced at her, consumed by tense anticipation. It felt as though he was about to learn a great secret… one that would finally let him see the full picture clearly, or at least show him the way to the truth.

Very few people in the world could have uncovered this mystery… but Changing Star herself had infiltrated one of the great clans, while Cassie was helping her. And now, he was going to benefit from their effort.

Sunny remained silent, waiting. Nephis calmly wiped the last plate, put it on the drying rack, and turned to him. White sparks ignited in her eyes.

"It has to do with the Sovereigns… and their Domains."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Domains? I've heard a few people use that word. However, I still don't know what it means."

Nephis nodded, then headed toward the stairs to the sixth, highest

level of the tower.

"Come… uh, if you want."

Sunny gave her a dark look, then followed. As they ascended the stairs, Neph spoke:

"To people who know about the existence of the Sovereigns, Domains are synonymous with their rule. So, one might say that they belong to a Domain, meaning that they serve one of the Supremes. However, there is a deeper secret here. As I found out, Domains are not just an abstract concept… in fact, they are very real. A Domain is an extension of a Sovereign's Aspect."

Sunny stared at her silently. He had suspected as much, but never had any proof. More than that, he had no idea what that statement actually implied.

"So it is an Ability, like the Transformation Ability that the Saints possess? One that affects an area, perhaps?"

Neph frowned.

"Not… exactly. Once a Transcendent becomes a Supreme, they do unlock another Ability — one that is tremendously powerful, at that. You might call it a supreme, ultimate, or pinnacle Ability, I guess. But a Domain is something separate from the Supreme Ability.

It is another innate function of the Aspect, just like controlling soul essence or accessing the Soul Sea is — a natural progression of one's ability to express their power."

She lingered for a moment.

"Within their Domain, a Sovereign is nearly invincible. Mind you, I don't know everything about it just yet. I've just gleaned bits and pieces of information where I could. The point is, each step of the Path of Ascension… as well as of the Path of Corruption… has its own meaning. The first path is the ascent toward divinity, while the second is the descent into profanity."

They reached the sixth level, which, just like the first, only

encompassed one spacious hall. This one was smaller than the great chamber where Hope had once been chained, and suffused with bright sunlight. It was empty and spartan, with only a few pieces of wooden furniture and a bed occupying a small section of the vast stone floor, the white curtains of the bed's canopy billowing in the wind.

Apparently, this was where Nephis herself lived. She led Sunny to one of the four large balconies and stopped there, looking at the breathtaking vista of the boundless blue sky. The clouds were rolling past the Ivory Island like a swirling, radiant sea.

"Those who are Dormant can Awaken. After that, some rise above the mundane and take the first step toward the divine, becoming Ascended. Others descend into the abyss of corruption and become Fallen. That is the meaning of the second step — rise or fall. The essence of the third step is transformation. Ascended truly transcend their mundane origin, becoming Transcendent.

Fallen become corrupted by the dark abyss, and are thus called Corrupted."

Sunny looked at her and frowned.

'Awakening, Ascension, Transformation.'

"What about the fourth step, then? What about the Great and the Supreme?"

Nephis met his gaze, her cold grey eyes shining with the reflected sunlight.

"The essence of the fourth step is authority. I guess a god has to be a god of something… or someone. At the fourth step, the Sovereigns start to coalesce their domains. And that, I think, is much more important than all other forms of power they possess. I think… I think only the Domain can pave the way for a Supreme to take the next step on the Path of Ascension. And become Sacred."

Chapter-1074: Authority

Sunny looked down, at the rolling sea of clouds. He was considering Neph's words.

Some of what she said was common knowledge… people had long theorized that there was a profound meaning to the way the Spell named different Ranks. Ascended were called Ascended because they had risen above their human nature, Transcendent were called Transcendent because they had broken past it, assuming some traits of the divine.

The Supremes, then, took another step toward godhood, and that step seemed to be tied to authority. It made sense, really, because that progression was similar to how Nightmare Creatures grew in Class — the Tyrants were all about rule and authority, too.

However, there was something in what Nephis had told him that caught Sunny's attention. He glanced at her and asked:

"...Did you say "start" to coalesce their Domains?"

That word meant much more than one would think. If there was a start, there also had to be an end… much more importantly, it hinted that a Domain was not something that Supremes simply gained. There was a process to it.

Neph smiled.

"Indeed, you caught on to the very heart of the issue. The Domains are not set in stone… as all other forms of power, they can change and be changed. Simply put, a Domain can grow — in fact, I suspect that it must grow for a Supreme to realize his or her potential. And, therefore, a Domain can also be diminished."

Sunny's eyes gleamed. He was starting to understand…

'I see. I see now… of course! It makes so much sense.'

He looked at her intently, the shadows around him growing darker.

"And how exactly do Domains grow?"

Changing Star lingered for a moment, then turned to look at the sky.

"Well… it is hard to say. All Domains are unique, after all, just like all Aspects are unique. However, there are some common things that all of them most likely share. So, I would say that there are two ways. One is the natural way — that was how the ancient people of the Dream Realm spread their authority and built their Domains."

Sunny slowly nodded. People like Noctis and Auro of the Nine had also been Awakened… however, he knew very little about how they reached higher Ranks of power. There had been no Nightmares in the ancient past, nor had there been the Spell.

The Spell…

Nephis noticed the look of realization on his face and nodded.

"Yes. The Spell provides training wheels for the Awakened of the lower Ranks, creating a harrowing, but swift and streamlined road for them to reach greater power. There are so many tools it gives us, that we take for granted. So why wouldn't it provide assistance to the Sovereigns, as well? The Spell has created a straightforward way for the Supremes to expand their Domains."

She took a step back and placed her hand on the ivory wall of the great pagoda.

"Do you get it yet?"

Sunny stared, silent. A few moments later, he said in a low voice:

"The… Citadels?"

Neph smiled.

"Correct. No matter what authority you wield, it can only spread

through two mediums… I think. Territory, or people. The Citadels naturally encompass both. We knew all along that the Spell creates the Gateways, which serve as the heart and purpose for the existence of the Citadels. However, as it turns out, there is more to it.

Much more…"

She lingered for a few moments, then frowned.

"I am… not too sure about the true scope of what functions the Citadels hide. What I do know, however, is that Saints already have the ability to bind them. We have not found out what this binding entails, exactly, but I think it is safe to say that if a Saint serves a Sovereign and takes control of a Citadel, the Sovereign's Domain expands."

Changing Star hesitated.

"It also seems that not all Citadels are created equal. There are some that are very special, and much more desirable… like Bastion, or Ravenheart. Or this island. It is not a coincidence that each of the great clans had fought to conquer one of the locations marked on the map you found in the Ebony Tower."

Sunny looked at her sharply, considering the implications. Bastion, Ravenheart, the Ivory Tower… from what he knew, each of these places had served as the stronghold of one of the daemons. The House of Night was in possession of the fourth one. The fifth was located in the utterly lethal Hollow Mountains… which clan Valor had nevertheless put a lot of effort into exploring, disregarding the danger.

And the sixth one — the last one, considering that Weaver did not seem to have possessed a stronghold — the sixth one…

Was the black pyramid far to the east. The pyramid that seemed to be somehow tied to the Chain of Nightmares.

Sunny took a deep breath.

"So, what exactly are you trying to say?"

Nephis shook her head.

"Isn't it obvious? Both Anvil of Valor and Ki Song need to expand their spheres of influence to perfect their Domains. However… there are only so many human Citadels to go around. Which means that two Domains — or at least these particular two Domains — can't coexist. For one to be perfected, it has to swallow the other."

She grew quiet for a moment, and then said somberly:

"That… is the true reason for the war between their clans."

Sunny looked away, an ugly grimace contorting his face. A sense of dark, vicous anger was smoldering in his heart.

Neph sighed.

"Antarctica will be the first major battlefield of this war, but it won't be the last. Most of it will happen in the Dream Realm after both sides deliver their strikes. But the first act is also the most important… if one of the clans manages to gain momentum in the Southern Quadrant, their advantage might very well snowball into an unstoppable avalanche.

So, their clash in Antarctica will be extremely fierce and bloody. In fact… Anvil is sending his own daughter there. Morgan will lead Valor forces in the Southern Quadrant. That alone shows how serious his intentions are."

Changing Star studied the clear skies, then turned to Sunny and said, her voice even:

"So… now, do you understand?"

Chapter-1075: Know The Enemy

Sunny remained silent for a while, responding only when the pressure of the Flaw started to turn into searing pain.

"Yeah… I think I understand."

Many things became clearer now. Finally, he knew more about the Sovereigns, and the power they wielded. Awakened, Masters, and Saints… all of them were bestowed with great strength, but that strength was of a personal kind. Supremes were, without doubt, even more fearsome warriors — however, their true advantage lay in their authority.

He was not too certain about what exactly a Domain did — even Nephis did not know the details, after all — but understood the concept. A Domain was a physical manifestation of a Sovereign's Aspect, a territory where their rule was supreme.

And that manifestation, while representing their personal strength, relied on external factors to exist and grow. Authority, influence, power… power over someone, and not just yourself. All of these things were conveniently intertwined in the form of Citadels, which the Spell created.

Citadels…

Sunny looked down, as if trying to pierce the Ivory Tower with his gaze. Then, he sighed.

There were still a lot of unanswered questions.

On the surface, the intention of the Sovereigns seemed obvious… well, with the exception of Asterion, who was the most mysterious of the three. They had established their nascent Domains in the unique Citadels that had once belonged to the daemons, and then slowly

expanded their rule, uplifting loyal Ascended to Sainthood.

…And eliminating those Transcendent who refused to swear fealty to them, thus failing to become the vessels of their Domains. The only two exceptions were the House of Night and, to a much lesser extent, the government. Both were convenient to have around and fulfilled a necessary function. The seat of power of the great clan Night, on top of that, was located in the deadly waters of the Stormsea.

Launching an invasion into their territory was a dire task.

'But what about Professor Obel's theory?'

Indeed, something did not add up. If Anvil of Valor and Ki Song were so obsessed with perfecting their Domains, then why were they suppressing the emergence of Saints? The more Transcendents there were, the more human Citadels there would be in the Dream Realm, and the more territory they would be able to conquer.

Come to think of it, if they really had no choice but to wage war on each other, then why had they waited for two decades to start it? Why were they only attempting the conquest now?

Why had they waited for the Chain of Nightmares to descend upon the Southern Quadrant?

Sunny frowned, then glanced at Nephis.

"I feel like we are still missing a key piece of information. This timing… it is just too strange."

'And hateful.'

Of course, there was a possibility that all of it was just a coincidence. Maybe Ki Song simply decided to use the power imbalance that the death of Saint Cormac and Mordret's Ascension had created. But Sunny felt like there was more to this war than they thought.

Neph leaned on the parapet of the sunlit balcony and sighed.

"We certainly do. The Sovereigns have many secrets, and I won't claim to know all of them. But… does it really matter what they are

hiding? The truth remains the same."

Sunny scoffed.

She was right. Nephis was determined to destroy the Sovereigns, because they were suppressing humanity in its conquest of the Spell… and, more importantly, stood in her way. She did not care what motivated the Supremes, and neither did Sunny. He hated them all the same.

Valor and Song deserved each other, as far as he was concerned. But Antarctica was about to be swept up in their treasonous strife, and that… that, he could not allow to happen.

'Look at you go. Do you even hear yourself? Who are you to defy the great clans? Do you imagine yourself to be someone capable of stopping them? You're definitely not… sure, you have some power, but in the grand scheme of things, you're just a bug. A single Master, no matter how strong, is only capable enough to be an expendable pawn.'

Sunny gritted his teeth.

It was true… no matter how incensed he was, there was nothing he could do. The best Sunny could hope to achieve was to minimize the damage that the clash of the great clans was bound to do to the evacuation effort. A little.

That only made him angrier.

'Well… then that's exactly what I am going to do. I will prepare, learn their weaknesses, and try to suppress the fallout of their despicable acts as much as I can."

Luckily, Sunny knew just the right person to provide him with information. Knowing what the opponent was planning came first.

He remained silent for a few moments, then glanced at Neph.

"So, what exactly is going to happen? What will be their first move?"

She smiled wistfully.

"In a few months, the great clans will announce that they are sending reinforcements to the Southern Quadrant. Both Song and Valor will dispatch a strong force to Antarctica… but not too strong. A couple more Saints, a dozen or two Masters, and a few hundred Awakened. Officially, their mission will be to support the Evacuation Army in fighting the Nightmare Creatures.

In reality, however, they are being sent there to fight each other."

Sunny scowled, slightly confused.

"...How, though? By now, most of the human forces on the continent are concentrated in the siege capitals, with very little reason to venture outside. Are these Saints and their forces going to just go and attack the cities?"

Nephis shook her head.

"No… at least I think they won't. Not unless there is a very good reason to. In truth, they won't be staying behind the walls of the siege capitals most of the time — because they have a secondary goal, as well. One that requires going outside and attacking the Nightmare Creatures."

He tilted his head a little.

"And what goal might that be?"

Changing Star simply looked at him, and a moment later, Sunny's eyes widened slightly.

"The pyramid?"

Chapter-1076: Know Yourself

Nephis nodded.

"Song and Valor are going to be in a race to conquer it. They will search for Nightmare Gates that can be used to establish a beachhead in the unexplored region of the Dream Realm where the black pyramid is located. Once they find a comparatively safe… ford… they will use the Call to transport their Saints, Masters, and Awakened there, establishing temporary outposts."

She paused, looked at him, and continued:

"These outposts will be used to launch expeditions toward the pyramid. The end goal is to find a relatively safe place in close proximity to it, build a true fortress there, and then use that fortress as the staging ground for the conquest of the Tomb."

Changing Star lingered for a moment.

"It might be easier to think of it in terms of the Forgotten Shore. Each Gate is connected to a Seed of Nightmare somewhere in the region. Some Seeds might be in the depths of the Crimson Labyrinth, and everyone who follows the Call to the area around them will be drowned by the Dark Sea.

Some Seeds, however, might be located on higher ground — those who enter the Dream Realm near these Seeds will be able to survive, and then slowly make their way through the labyrinth. The end goal is to find a place like the Dark City, build a fortress akin to the Bright Castle, and then use it to conquer the Crimson Spire."

'What an apt metaphor.'

Sunny couldn't help but smile darkly.

"They might find out that this task is much harder than they imagine it to be."

In theory, such a plan seemed solid. Each of the hundreds, if not thousands of Nightmare Gates in East Antarctica was connected to a Seed of Nightmare in the region surrounding the Tomb of Ariel. By relying on the Call, these Gates could be used to enter the Dream Realm somewhere near the corresponding Seed.

Then, by pinpointing a suitably safe area and the Gate connected to it, the great clans could transport their forces into the Dream Realm without risking instant annihilation. These forces would then explore and fight their way toward the black pyramid.

The region could contain several Citadels, even — by conquering one, Song or Valor would be able to establish a safe and stable corridor to ferry fighters and supplies over. If there were no Citadels except for the Tomb of Ariel itself, though, the Saints would have to play the role of ferrymen.

But… the mysterious desert was utterly lethal. It was much worse than even the Forgotten Shore. And the forces of the great clans would not only have to fight against the endless flood of Nightmare Creatures populating it — they would also have to fight against each other.

Sunny couldn't help but shiver. Nephis, meanwhile, simply nodded.

"The task will be a hellish one, indeed. But these are the great clans, Sunny… no matter how you and I might feel about them, their fearsome reputation is not unearned. Both Valor and Song represent the absolute pinnacle of human achievement in warfare. If they can't do it, no one can."

He remained silent for a while, thinking.

The real goal of the great clans was to kill each other, while their secondary goal was to conquer the Tomb of Ariel. One naturally led to the other. He now knew that the siege capitals would remain mostly unmolested by their war, at least… unless something unexpected happened.

However, both clans would be feverishly seeking suitable Gates in East Antarctica, without doubt ambushing and slaughtering each other in the process. Army patrols and the infrastructure of the evacuation corridors could very well become collateral damage in their clashes.

Not to mention that they were bound to send the Nightmare Creatures into a frenzy… and maybe even lead the abominations back to the cities.

There would be some violence within the siege capitals, as well, or at least bloody clandestine operations.

Two of the three Saints currently present in East Antarctica belonged to the warring factions, after all… if the servants of Ki Song had an opportunity to deal with Saint Tyris in Falcon Scott, they would have taken it, without a doubt — the consequences for the civilians sheltered in the city be damned.

'Bastards…'

In any case, Sunny had some idea about how things would progress in the coming months now. This was already enough for him to start thinking.

Eventually, he glanced at Nephis and hesitated for a few moments. There was one question that was still gnawing at his him…

Sunny sighed.

"And where will you be while all of this is happening?"

Nephis looked at him. White sparks danced in her eyes, and then, she suddenly smiled.

"Where do you think? Of course, I will be accompanying Morgan… sister dearest… to Antarctica. Cassie, the Fire Keepers, and I — all of us are going there with her. I've told you that Valor does not trust me much, yet. What better way to earn trust and merit than on the battlefield?"

He stared at her silently for a while.

"I guess there is none. So, we are going to meet in the Southern Quadrant?"

Changing Star shrugged.

"If you wish. Or… you can stay out of this mess entirely. You have made it very clear that you don't want to have anything to do with the great clans and their war, so… it's up to you if and how much you get involved."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Up to me, huh?"

'Yeah, no… that ship has sailed.'

He really could hide in some remote siege capital, use his service record and exalted status to get himself a cushy assignment, and spend the rest of the campaign relaxing… as much anyone could relax in Antarctica.

However, was he willing to?

Did he want to?

…Not really.

'If I do not go to hell, who else will go?'

Sunny had once told the Sin of Solace that the great clans were free to act with impunity because there was no one around to hold them responsible. He did not wish to teach anyone lessons in responsibility…

But he did want to teach those bastards a lesson in humility. The harsher and more painful the lesson, the better.

'I'll make them pay… if I go to hell, I'll drag them with me…'

Sunny looked at the boundless blue sky, then turned to Nephis and smiled.

"See you in Antarctica, then."

Chapter-1077: Midnight Sun

Summer had come to Antarctica. The winds still brought with them a piercing chill, but it was warm enough for the snow to thaw under direct sunlight. Gurgling streams of water turned East Antarctica into a land of countless brooks and numerous lakes, which all glistened in the sun or drowned in the shadows of the tall mountains.

The sun itself was distant and cold, but it never disappeared from the blue expanse of the sky. Just like there had been no end to the night, now, there was no end to the day. The twilight of the long dawn had gradually turned into daylight, and now that October was in full swing, the whole continent was suffused with bright radiance… and would be for the next five months.

The situation on the continent, however, was far from light. It was grim and dire, as if Antarctica was had submerged deeper into an endless cycle of dreadful nightmares… the Chain of Nightmares was escalating with each day, and the Evacuation Army was forced to take more and more desperate measures to withstand it.

…The remains of a once-thriving city were buried under thawing snow, with the skeletal remains of tall buildings rising above it like dark cliffs. This settlement had not been chosen to become a siege capital, and so it was abandoned at the start of the campaign. Now, it was nothing but a desolate ruin. From time to time, that ruin would turn into a battleground, sustaining even more damage.

Currently, a furious battle was coming to an end on the streets of the abandoned city. A patrol of soldiers had been chased here by a swarm of Nightmare Creatures and forced to stand their ground. The humans had fought violently and almost defeated the attacking abominations… but sadly, the sounds of the combat awoke a fiend that had been slumbering in the ruins.

The creature had torn a bloody path through the remaining

abominations, and then slaughtered the soldiers. Now, only one of them remained alive. Lieutenant Catphine was struggling desperately with the controls of her MWP, but it was of no use — the mighty machine had been damaged too severely and toppled, its vestibular systems going completely offline.

She could have brought it back up relying on nothing but her piloting skills, but most of the limb hydraulics were destroyed, and the frame itself was bent and torn, large sections of the alloy armor already missing. Even the coolant pathways were breached, turning the pilot's cabin into a scorching inferno.

The paint she used to decorate its walls with drawings was blistering and melting, and Catphine herself felt as if she was going to melt, too.

But, of course, she wouldn't.

The abomination that had slaughtered her squad was currently on top of the MWP, clawing at the war machine with its powerful limbs. The armor was parting before the terrifying claws like paper. Each strike sent a concussive shockwave through the frame, tossing Catphine up and down in the tight confines of her safety harness. The creature was going to kill her long before the heat had a chance to.

'Curse it!'

There was just no way for her to fight against a Fallen Demon… and that was what the creature was, most likely. At least the Awakened leader of the patrol had called it that before being killed by the fiend.

But even knowing how hopeless the situation was, Catphine stubbornly controlled the only functioning arm of the MWP, bending it at the elbow to press the seven barrels of the kinetic machine gun installed on the forearm of the war platform to the abomination's side. The barrels spun, unleashing a flood of heavy tungsten rounds into the demon's impenetrable hide.

In just a second, the machine gun spat close to two hundred armor-piercing bullets.

However, all of them simply ricocheted off the harrowing creature's skin, not even bruising it. The fiend was pushed slightly to the side, then glanced at the firing weapon with its mad, burning eyes. In the next moment, the abomination's claws struck, ripping through the MWP's arm and severing it entirely.

The next blow finally breached the cockpit, destroying the screens and letting Catphine see the fiend with her own two eyes. She gritted her teeth.

'At least there's some cool air now…'

She knew that she was about to die.

…But she didn't.

The battle had caused plumes of thick smoke to rise above the ruins, obscuring the sun and submerging the battlefield in deep darkness. At that moment, the darkness suddenly surged and moved forward. Catphine blinked, thinking that she was seeing things.

Two giant hands suddenly rose from the ground, grabbing the Fallen Demon by the shoulders. The hands had matte, inky-black skin, slender wrists, and long, dexterous fingers that ended with sharp claws. These claws cut through the abomination's indestructible skin with ease.

Then, the dark hands pulled… and ripped the fiend apart.

Half of its monstrous body landed to the left of the fallen MWP, the other half to the right. A river of blood and viscera splashed, falling into the turned-up dirt.

Just like that, the terrifying creature had been slaughtered.

'Wh—what…'

Catphine suddenly felt cold. The Fallen Demon was a harrowing monster… so what kind of otherworldly horror would be capable of killing it with such ease?

As she stared, a figure emerged from the darkness, landing softly on

the torn frame of the MWP. It was a young man with porcelain skin and black hair, his eyes glistening like dark gemstones. Despite the biting cold and the nightmarish surroundings, he wore no armor and wielded no weapons. His slender body was covered only by a light tunic of black silk.

When the young man appeared, the darkness enveloping the destroyed city suddenly seemed to become deeper, darker, and more frightening.

The sight of him was in such stark contrast with the ravaged, war-torn ruin that he seemed more like an apparition than a living being.

Catphine gulped.

The young man lingered for a moment, and then looked at her calmly.

"Are you alright, soldier?"

'Oh gods… he speaks…'

It took her a few seconds to digest what the eerie stranger had just said.

"...What?"

He leaned forward and grabbed the jagged edges of the breach in the cockpit's armor, easily pulling the alloy apart to widen the gap.

"I said, are you alright?"

Catphine lingered for a moment.

"Ah… y—yes."

The stranger nodded.

"Good. I'm Ascended Sunless of the Special Reconnaissance Unit. You can call me Master Sunless or Major Sunless. Let's get you out of this thing…"

Chapter-1078: Army Scout

Sunny helped the pilot climb out of the ravaged MWP, then looked around somberly. The ruin of the city was covered by the signs of a fierce battle… sadly, he had been too late to arrive. Most of the soldiers were already dead.

'Damn it…'

He had noticed the commotion in the ruins by chance, while making his way through the wilderness to accomplish a different mission. If not for the habit of sending his shadows in a wide circle around him, Sunny would have never even known that a squad of human soldiers had been trapped here. He used Shadow Step to arrive as swiftly as he could, but ended up saving only one.

With a sigh, Sunny helped the young woman climb down from the wreck of the MWP, summoned the Endless Spring, and handed it to her.

"Here. Drink some water."

The pilot kept staring at him strangely, but he was long used to such stares. He gave her some time, then took the glass bottle back and asked, making sure to keep his voice neutral:

"I am sorry about your comrades… but how did you guys end up in this sector? Did you not receive the message that it was designated as a black zone by Army Command?"

The young woman grimaced.

"We… did, sir. But by then, it was already too late. We were on a routine patrol along the Seventeenth Evacuation Corridor when we came under attack from a swarm of Nightmare Creatures. We beat them back and pursued… sadly, a few minutes later, a Gate opened

right behind us. We were quickly surrounded, and had to run for our lives. We ran all the way to this city, and…"

She sighed.

Sunny awkwardly patted the pilot on the shoulder.

"I see. I know a thing or two about bad luck, lieutenant… it can get anyone. You did your best."

Internally, he was shaking his head.

'Corridor Seventeen… that place just attracts trouble, doesn't it?'

Corridor Seventeen connected one of the largest siege capitals in the region to the coastal fortress. Maintaining it was of vital importance to the evacuation effort, but recently, it had become harder and harder to keep the area clean.

Sunny himself was on a mission to scout out a potential threat to that corridor.

After reaching East Antarctica, he had basically received carte blanche to choose any assignment he wanted — out of those suitable for an Ascended, of course. In the end, Sunny refused another command assignment and requested to be sent to the Special Reconnaissance Unit.

The SRU was responsible for prowling the abomination-infested wilderness in search of targets that could pose a serious threat to the siege capitals, keeping tabs on their movements, and even attempting to lure them away from the cities from time to time. Powerful Tyrants, Terrors, and even Titans… those were the creatures that Army Command had them observe and track.

Needless to say, the task was extremely dangerous, and often lethal. The SRU consisted exclusively of powerful Masters, and each of them either had an Aspect uniquely suitable for such work or was an absolute elite.

As for Sunny, he was both. The assignment suited him fine, despite the tremendous danger… partially because it granted him a lot of

freedom in his movements and actions, partially because he was reluctant to be put in charge of soldiers again.

Being a leader had never been something Sunny enjoyed. The previous time was enough.

It was too much, really.

He glanced at the MWP pilot and sighed.

"...Catch your breath. We can't stay for long, though — this place isn't safe, and I am on a timer."

Looking at her, he couldn't help but remember the Irregulars. Sunny's face darkened.

Most of his people were dead now. Only Kim and Luster remained… and, perhaps, Quentin. There was no news of the gallant healer, so he was most likely gone, as well.

Luster had been shipped back to NQSC long ago. He was now slowly recovering in the hospital complex of the Academy, and doing quite well — Sunny knew of it because Kim remained in close contact with the lucky guy. In fact, he suspected that there was something going on between them.

Their young relationship, however, had to remain a long-distance one for now. Kim herself was still here in East Antarctica, but was kept far away from the battlefield. After returning from the Antarctic Center, she had been transferred to the Strategic Intelligence Department of Army Command.

Now, her Aspect was being used to determine the vulnerabilities of various Nightmare Creatures on a wide scale, and disseminate that knowledge to the troops.

There were many such specialists stationed at army headquarters, but Kim was doing especially well for herself.

Beth had been evacuated and reached safety a while back, too. Sunny and she kept in touch, sending each other messages once in a while. However, he had a feeling that the young woman wanted to forget

what had happened in the Southern Quadrant, at least for now. Talking to him was perhaps a painful reminder.

So, most of Sunny's communications were with Rain. His sister was doing well in the safety of NQSC. She was training diligently, and not showing any symptoms of being infected by the Spell. The Serpent was protecting her, too. At least in that regard, Sunny felt somewhat assured.

As for himself…

Ever since reaching East Antarctica, Sunny only had three goals. Turn the Ravenous Fiend into a Shadow, become a Tyrant, and prepare for the arrival of the great clans.

He had spent fragments on the little imp first, then hunted down numerous abominations in hopes of forming the fifth Shadow Core. Now, he was mere days away from catching up to Neph. As for the third goal… Sunny had made good progress on that front, too.

As he thought about it, his communication device suddenly came alive, and a familiar voice resounded in his ear:

"Where the hell are you, Sunny?"

He smiled slightly.

"Sorry, Jet. I've been delayed a little. Are you still en route?"

Her voice came through the static, sounding a little out of breath:

"Yeah… and I have a nasty swarm of abominations on my tail."

Sunny nodded.

"I'll send Mongrel your way. Lead them to the rendezvous point, and she'll take care of everything. I'll arrive in a few hours."

With that, Sunny glanced at the MWP pilot and sighed.

"Time to go, soldier. Say your goodbyes. Then, I'll bring you to the nearest army outpost."

He turned away, giving the young woman some space, and looked up, at the cold sun hanging motionlessly high above.

A long sigh escaped from Sunny's lips.

'How bright. I never thought I would miss the polar night…'

Chapter-1079: Imp

The pilot did not spend a long time bidding farewell to her comrades. By that point in the campaign, everyone had experienced loss and defeat… the soldiers had not grown numb to watching people die, but they did become used to it.

Death had always surrounded those who fought against the Nightmare Spell, and here in Antarctica, it was even more inescapable, both for the Awakened and for the mundanes.

When the young woman returned, however, a confused expression appeared on her face. Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

The pilot pointed.

"Uh… where did my MWP go?"

He looked back. The wrecked war platform was, indeed, gone. In its place, hidden behind a pile of dirt, sat an ugly little creature. It was hurriedly pushing a piece of bent alloy into its wide, toothy mouth with both hands. Noticing that someone was looking, the creature froze for a moment and feverishly continued to chew on the armored alloy, as if afraid that it would be taken away.

Sunny rolled his eyes.

"That little bastard right there ate it. Don't mind him…"

It was hard to imagine that the scrawny imp had devoured the massive machine, considering that it was dozens of times larger than him... but that was exactly what had happened. Sunny did not know what kind of infernal engine was hidden in the Imp's stomach, but the little guy's appetite was inexhaustible.

Anything that entered his mouth disappeared without a trace, and there were very few things that his sharp teeth couldn't rip apart.

Sunny shuddered, remembering how he had turned the tiny wretch into a Shadow.

He had done it not long after arriving in East Antarctica. Before, Sunny had been planning to become a Tyrant first — but that was because he needed more power, fast, during the siege of Falcon Scott. Now that things had calmed down, the circumstances were not as pressing. He could allow himself to delay a little, and made converting the Echo of the Ravenous Fiend a priority.

Sunny had possessed three Shadows before, but funnily enough, only one of them — Saint — came from an Echo. The process of conversion itself had looked pretty much the same as the first time. In the tranquil silence of his Soul Sea, two beams of dark light descended from one of the Shadow Cores.

One fell on the Echo of the Scavenger, the other on a motionless shadow that stood with the rest of them on the still surface of the calm waters.

The shadow of the Ravenous Fiend seemed to dissolve into the dark light, and then, the Echo became wreathed in black flames that seeped into its flesh, changing it on a fundamental level. The boundless spellweave that was hidden within the Echo disappeared, replaced by darkness.

A living shadow was now dwelling within the body of the imp instead, four transparent and empty embers burning in its depths.

…Granted, that scene was not as majestic and awe-inspiring as when Saint had become a Shadow. The scrawny little bastard could not compare to the magnificent stone knight in any shape or form, after all.

Nevertheless, that was how Sunny had acquired his fourth Shadow. What came next, however… that, he did not like to think about one bit.

The Imp was a blank slate and had tremendous potential for growth, but Sunny had to be careful about what he fed the gluttonous creature. Some types of food were easy to come by, but would produce mediocre results. Worse than that, he strongly suspected that some advancements would prevent more beneficial powers from taking root in the future.

There was one he could not compromise on, though… affinity to shadows.

And since shadow creatures were almost impossible to find, Sunny had no choice but to feed the hateful gremlin some of his own flesh again.

The first time he summoned the Fiend into the real world, the tiny creature looked around, then stared at him with fright and ran away, hiding behind Saint's leg. The imp then grabbed her calve with his eight clawed fingers and cautiously peeked from behind it, trembling slightly.

"Get over here, bastard!"

Unable to refuse Sunny's command, the imp reluctantly abandoned his shelter and slowly waddled over. The moment Sunny offered the gremlin his forearm and ordered him to take a bite, the bastard's eyes ignited with ferocious glee, though.

What happened next… was a truly ghastly experience for Sunny. He endured it by bitterly fantasizing about killing the vile little creature for the second time. However, it was worth it in the end — the scrawny fiend regained its ability to travel through shadows.

Later, Sunny learned that the process of gaining new Attributes and Abilities was rarely, if ever, so easy and fast. The Fiend had already possessed a high affinity to shadows thanks to being one, and Sunny himself was even more unique — he was a divine shadow, after all. These two reasons made it possible for the little imp to inherit a vestige of his power in one go.

As to how the bastard had managed it the first time around, Sunny had no idea. Maybe the inherent adaptability of the Scavengers

resonated with the innate formlessness of shadows. Maybe the wretch had simply gotten lucky...

The point of it was that he couldn't just command the gluttonous scavenger to devour a Nightmare Creature and expect the same to happen. It took a long time and a lot of corpses — suitable ones, at that — for the imp to grow in the right direction. Luckily, he was not limited to only eating flesh.

Which was why Sunny was currently concentrating on feeding the imp all kinds of steel, alloy, and mystical metals. The Ravenous Fiend's bone armor had been rather spectacular, but he was determined to come up with something even more indestructible.

Watching as the scrawny bastard hurriedly finished chewing on the last piece of the broken MWP, Sunny smiled slightly, his eyes shining with ominous glee.

'Eat, eat… eat more, trashling! I need to fatten you up…

The imp suddenly shivered and looked at Sunny with wide, terrified eyes.

Sunny suppressed a menacing grin and dismissed the imp, then looked at the pilot.

"I got him as an Echo. Come, let's go… we need to hurry.'

Chapter-1080: Marvelous Devil

As a scout, Sunny constantly had to traverse great distances across the abomination-infested wilderness of East Antarctica. He would usually ride atop Nightmare or glide through the shadows with incredible speed, but right now, neither of these methods were an option.

His steed was with Saint, and he obviously couldn't leave the stranded MWP pilot behind by turning into a shadow. Theoretically, Sunny could carry the young woman on his back and run, which would be faster than limiting his speed to that of a mundane human. But he was not too desperate to save time.

There was an army outpost relatively close to the ruined city, and although normal patrols would be slaughtered if they tried to take the convenient shortcut, nothing that dwelled there could threaten Sunny.

As they followed a small river that snaked between barren hills, Sunny summoned the runes and glanced at the list of his shadows. It read:

Shadows: [Onyx Saint], [Soul Serpent], [Nightmare], [Ravenous Fiend].

Sunny concentrated on the last string of runes, summoning a detailed description of the little bastard.

Shadow: [Ravenous Fiend].

Shadow Rank: Transcendent.

Shadow Class: Devil.

Shadow Description: [A pitiful little creature traveled through a

nightmarish land, harboring a bitter grudge in its tiny heart. Driven by resentment and spite, it suffered many trials and conquered untold dangers to become a marvelous devil. But fate was unkind. The ravenous devil met a much more terrible fiend, and turned into his shadow.]

Sunny stared at the runes with a bleak expression.The Spell had always liked to tease him… at least he thought that it did… but this one was just unfair.

'How come I'm the fiend? The bastard literally has the word "fiend" in his name!"

Shaking his head, he moved past the description and continued to read:

Shadow Attributes: [Lucky], [Marvel], [Ravenous], [Shadow Sworn], [Lesser Iron Body].

[Lucky] Attribute Description: "This Shadow is favored by fortune."

Sunny sighed. His own Attribute, [Fated], attracted both incredible and absolutely terrible luck. The imp, however, was blessed with only good fortune. It was most likely the small Scavenger's very first, innate Attribute… no wonder the bastard had survived meeting him twice.

'Damnation!'

Peeved by the blatant unfairness, Sunny continued to read:

[Marvel] Attribute Description: "This Shadow is a marvelous learner. It is stunningly keen and supremely adaptable, absorbing new knowledge with astonishing speed."

'Lucky and smart… well, who cares? At the end of the day, it still didn't help him survive meeting me for the third time. If the wretch was so smart, he should have avoided me like a plague...'

Sunny had seen these descriptions before, of course, but he still couldn't help seething over them.

[Ravenous] Attribute Description: "This Shadow possesses an insatiable hunger, and a frightening potential for growth. The more it eats, the more it will grow."

This Attribute already seemed rather great, despite the fact that the imp had not grown even by a centimeter in the last two months. Sunny had fed him literally tons of armored alloy, as well as the corpses of many Nightmare Creatures with steel-like carapaces. He had no idea how much the little fiend had to gobble up to become bigger, but knew that the result would be worth it.

The true benefit of the [Ravenous] Attribute was much more subtle, though, and incredibly precious. It was the fact that, unlike Nightmare and Saint, the imp did not need to consume Memories to rise to a higher Rank. There was no counter of shadow fragments. Instead, the fiendish Shadow simply had to… devour.

It could become a Supreme Devil by simply devouring Nightmare Creatures… or any creatures, really… in great numbers. The more powerful, the better.

That put Sunny, who was already suffering terribly from the need to procure countless Memories, at ease.

'The imp is indeed lucky. If I had to choose between feeding Memories to Saint and Nightmare or him… well, the poor bastard would have definitely starved…'

Sunny smiled slightly and turned his attention to the last two Attributes:

[Shadow Sworn] Attribute Description: "This fiend is known to shadows."

That one was without surprise, and appeared after Sunny had fed the imp with his flesh. It was the same as what Shadow Blade Kurt had possessed, and showed a high affinity to shadows.

[Lesser Iron Body] Attribute Description: "This Shadow's flesh possesses qualities of metal."

He grinned in satisfaction.

'Finally, progress!'

The [Lesser Iron Body] had been [Nascent Iron Body] before. It seemed that munching on that MWP had finally pushed the imp over a threshold. He would be much sturdier now… and in the future, would even have a chance to become truly indestructible.

There had to be a Greater Iron Body as well, after all.

Happy to see the ankle-biter achieving something, Sunny finally glanced at the imp's Abilities. The runes read:

Shadow Abilities: [Scavenger], [Devourer], [Shadow Step].

[Scavenger] Ability Description: "This Shadow can attain the traits, Attributes, and Abilities of the creatures it consumes."

[Devourer] Ability Description: "This Shadow's teeth possess unnatural sharpness and strength. It can rend and maul even the most resilient things."

[Shadow Step] Ability Description: "This fiend can move freely between shadows, traveling from one to another in an instant or diving into them to move with great speed."

And that was it. Sunny's fourth Shadow… the critter was a sorry excuse of a Transcendent Devil, for now, but it would grow to be a real menace one day. In fact, Sunny had a feeling that the imp might just become one of the most terrifying weapons in his arsenal.

The Ravenous Fiend had been an exceedingly dire enemy, but now that he was serving Sunny, and thus enjoying the support of a benevolent, selfless, and supremely generous master… just how much more terrible would the wretched waif become?

Walking along the small river, Sunny used Shadow Manifestation to slaughter a Nightmare Creature that was waiting to ambush him and the MWP pilot, then sighed.

'I need to find a couple more of those iron golems I killed last week… or better yet, a whole swarm of them. A horde would be even better… my imp is a growing little wretch, after all. He needs to eat!"

Chapter-1081: Lake Ruin

Soon, they reached the army outpost. There had been a few Nightmare Creatures that attacked them on the way, including an especially vile Corrupted Monster — Sunny tore the former apart with hands woven out of shadows, and cut the latter down personally with a blade created the same way.

These days, he tried to avoid getting his own hands dirty, mostly using Shadow Manifestation to slaughter the enemy. Sunny wanted to hone and refine his mastery of Manifestation, and for that, he needed a lot of practice.

Additionally, he felt that it was unnecessary for him to get up close and personal with every godforsaken abomination standing in his way.

Perhaps it was the nature of his current mission as a solitary scout, or perhaps Sunny had simply received a chance to return to being cautious and stealthy after years of being forced to play the role of a frontline fighter… in any case, he strived to only enter melee range with an enemy if he was certain of killing the foe with a single strike.

Usually, one of Sunny's strikes was enough. If not, he would avoid a confrontation entirely.

The army outpost was located underground, similar to the supply depot he had visited once in the Antarctic Center. However, as a member of the Special Reconnaissance unit, Sunny knew very well where all the army assets were hidden.

Better yet, East Antarctica had no problems with communications… well, except for the usual interference of the Call… so he had been able to radio about their arrival in advance.

Sunny and the surviving MWP pilot were met by a cohort of sleep-

deprived Awakened. Despite their visible fatigue, the soldiers stood at attention and saluted him respectfully. Their eyes betrayed a hint of reverence.

'This again...'

Sunny was met with such stares anywhere he went in Antarctica, at least among the soldiers. The First Army and the Second Army were merged into one military now, but within it, people who had been in the Southern Quadrant since day one of the Chain of Nightmares were treated with silent respect.

That went tenfold for those who had been a part of the Antarctic Center contingent. The Antarctic Center had been the most terrifying battlefield of the operation yet, and almost the entire field army sent there had been wiped out. There were only a few survivors here and there — mostly those who had been among the evacuated wounded.

Needless to say, Sunny was both a veteran of the Antarctic Center and an Ascended. That was why most soldiers treated him with veneration.

"Master Sunless, sir!"

He nodded at the welcoming party and handed over the MWP pilot to them. The young woman had done well keeping pace with him on the way to the outpost, but now that they had reached safety, she looked to be on the verge of collapse. Of course, it was not at all surprising…

Sunny sighed and glanced at the Awakened.

"At ease. Take good care of the lieutenant… oh, and by the way. I've cleared a path through the hills and dealt with the Corrupted Monster that had been stalking the area. If you hurry, you might harvest what is left of it before more abominations show up."

The soldiers looked at each other, their eyes glinting. That monster had been causing a lot of trouble for the outpost, especially considering that it had blocked the pathway through the hills. With the creature gone, logistics would become much easier for them.

"Thank you, sir!"

Sunny nodded.

"Well then, I'll be off."

He looked at the MWP pilot, lingered for a few moments, and then said awkwardly:

"Stay alive, soldier."

With that, Sunny stepped through the shadows and disappeared from view. He had wasted a lot of time already, and was running late for the rendezvous with Soul Reaper.

The soldiers remained standing there for a while, staring at the empty space where he had stood before. Eventually, one of them said:

"That was him. The Devil..."

Another nodded with a stunned face.

But of course, Sunny was already far away and did not hear any of it.

The sun was circling in the sky, never falling behind the horizon. He glided through the shadows where he could, ran where he couldn't. From time to time, Sunny simply hid in the shadows, waiting for large swarms of Nightmare Creatures to pass by. These pauses slowed him down, but they also allowed him to recover some essence.

He avoided getting into fights to preserve more of it, as well… and also because there was no reason to.

It was already evening, or whatever passed for one in this strange land, when Sunny drew near another ruin. The city in front of him was almost entirely destroyed, and drowned by a vast lake, with only the remains of tall towers rising above the icy water.

The ruin was different from the one from before, and much older — it had been left behind by the wars that humans waged on each other during the Dark Times, not the rampage of the Chain of Nightmares. Nevertheless, the drowned city was Sunny's current mission.

He hid himself in the shadows of a rusted wreck and studied the ruin. There were bodies of Nightmare Creatures floating near one of the towers, painting the water black. Each of them seemed to have been killed by a single arrow. Sunny observed the area for a few minutes, noticing strange ripples on the surface of the lake — there were more abominations hiding underwater.

Finally satisfied, he activated his comm and contacted Jet.

"Reaper, it's Devil. I've arrived."

A few seconds later, her voice came through the static.

"...Took you long enough. Where are you?"

He looked around.

"Southern shore, near an old wreck on the slope of a flat hill."

Jet took a few minutes to respond.

"I see it. Move west for about a kilometer, then follow a collapsed tower into the lake. From there, you'll be able to see three huge smokestacks. I'm in the middle one, near the top. Get here as soon as possible… and be careful of the water. It is teeming with schools of tiny, hungry fishes."

Sunny lingered for a moment.

"Got it. What about the target?"

Soul Reaper responded in a few seconds, her voice sounding a bit tense:

"It's in the middle of the lake. I was waiting for you to arrive before trying to get a better look."

Nodding, Sunny glanced at the ripples in the cold water one more time, and then dashed out of his shelter.

Chapter-1082: Ancient Chimneys

He reached the giant chimney without too much problem, avoiding the teeth of the vicious fish-like creatures with the help of the Dark Wing and a couple of perilous leaps. The structure was wide and incredibly tall, reaching at least three hundred meters into the sky… and that was just the part visible above the water.

There were a few holes in the frame of the alloy smokestack, so Sunny did not waste time jumping through one of them. He found himself in a vast, dark well, still water radiating bone-chilling cold a few meters beneath his feet. A tiny circle of light was visible hundreds of meters above.

Sunny did not know what kind of industrial behemoth had demanded such an enormous chimney — three of them, in fact — and what kind of poison had been billowing out of them into the atmosphere in the past. However, even now, decades or even centuries later, the air inside was acrid and hard to inhale, reminding him of the worst days in the outskirts.

Grimacing, Sunny looked around, and then jumped to a piece of scaffolding a dozen or so meters above his current position.

Landing noiselessly on the weathered alloy, he smiled at Saint, who had been standing there, still as a statue, holding a bow in one hand. The taciturn knight turned her head slightly, acknowledging his arrival, then indifferently continued to watch the base of the smokestack.

He could feel Nightmare hiding in the darkness nearby, dissolved into the shadow form. The black steed moved, greeting him, and then grew still once again.

"Good work, guys."

Sunny's comm hissed.

"Get up here, I'm bored out of my mind."

He sighed, then turned into a shadow himself and ascended the tall structure, gliding upward in a wide spiral. As Sunny was going up the old alloy walls, he found himself involuntarily thinking about how long it would take Imp to eat the whole thing. Then, he caught himself and scoffed.

'Gods, what am I thinking about?'

But… it was really a lot of alloy…

At the top of the smokestack, strange machines were installed into the mouth of the well, and the walls were blackened by fire and soot. The acrid smell was somewhat reduced by the proximity to the open sky.

Jet was sitting on one of the pieces of machinery, her feet hanging above the abyssal drop. Noticing Sunny step out of the shadows, she closed the lid of an army-issued thermos, threw it into her backpack, and grinned.

"Here you are."

He nodded.

"Yeah. Sorry for making you wait."

Soul Reaper shook her head.

"I've been on a long reconnaissance mission the entire week. Honestly, having a chance to just sit and relax for a few hours was exactly what I needed."

Jet had joined the Special Reconnaissance Unit, just like Sunny. They mostly worked alone, but for the more dangerous missions, Army Command grouped two or more scouts together. As a result, the two of them continued to cooperate and fight side by side through most

of the past few months. By now, they made for a very good team.

Jet stood up and looked around, studying the ancient machinery.

"Hey, do you know what these things were for?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. Do you?"

She walked along the edge of the alloy platform and nodded.

"It's a filtration system. Basically, one furnace pushed a constant stream of toxic smoke through the smokestack, and on top of it… was another furnace. This one meant to burn all the toxicity out of the smoke and prevent it from getting into the atmosphere. So, each of these chimneys used to shoot out a colossal plume of fire into the sky. Must have been quite a sight, especially in winter."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"...Sounds kind of stupid."

Jet glanced at him with a bleak expression.

"Well, I'm not an engineer. It must have worked… otherwise, why waste all that time and energy on constructing filters? Anyway, let's get to the top. The faster we finish the mission, the faster we can get the hell out of this stench."

They scaled the last dozen or so meters of the smokestack using an ancient, rickety ring ladder, and climbed onto the lip of the giant chimney. It was as wide as a road. From here, most of the lake, and the city drowned by it, could be easily seen.

Sunny stared down, appreciating the surreal beauty of the desolate landscape beneath them. Almost at the same time, two of his shadows reached the top of the other two giant smokestacks.

Jet glanced at him.

"Well?"

He hesitated for a few moments.

"The one to our left is empty, but the right one… there is something hiding inside. Something… huge."

All the shadow could see were loops of flesh coiled inside the dark well of the ancient smokestack, filling almost a third of it.

Jet sighed with relief.

"Well, good. Because we need to get to the left one. Leave that thing, whatever it is, alone."

Sunny nodded, ordering his shadow to hide itself and keep an eye on the gargantuan creature.

The three towering chimneys were not too far away from each other, so getting from one to another was not a problem to them. However, it was not very safe — if something attacked you in the air, staying alive would be a challenge. So, unless someone like Kai was around, at least two people were required to keep each other safe.

Sunny temporarily borrowed Morgan's Warbow from Saint, and covered Jet as she glided across the wide gap between smokestacks using a flight Memory. She reached the next chimney, then summoned half a dozen sharp throwing stars and did the same for him — Sunny used the Dark Wing to breach the gap, and soon joined Jet.

Now, they were very close to coming in sight of the target of this mission.

He frowned.

"Do you feel it?"

Soul Reaper slowly nodded.

"Yeah. The Call is much stronger here. There must be a Category Three Gate nearby."

They walked to the opposite side of the smokestack and looked down.

From that position, nothing obstructed their view of the middle of the lake.

And there, nestled between the ancient ruins…

Sunny sighed.

"That… is going to be trouble."

Chapter-1083: Reconnaissance

The two of them lowered themselves to the weathered alloy, looking cautiously over the edge. Far away, in the middle of the ruined city, an enormous body of a ghastly creature was hidden between the rubble, long swathes of it submerged into the water.

The creature resembled a monstrous centipede that was at least a hundred meters long. It was encased in pale chitin… no, not chitin. Bone. The giant centipede seemed to be covered in countless thousands of human skulls, all of them stuck together to form a morbid carapace.

Its horrid maw was large enough to swallow an armored APC and full of grotesque, bone-white teeth. On its head, two tall, dead trees grew from the carapace of skulls like skeletal horns.

Making a point to only keep the abominable creature in his peripheral vision and not stare at it directly — powerful abominations could often sense a gaze directed at them — Sunny sighed.

"That… is going to be trouble."

He had chosen to remain as quiet as possible, relying on the [Blessing of Dusk] to convey his thoughts to Jet instead of speaking aloud. She nodded, then responded in the same manner, her voice resounding clearly inside his head despite the deathly silence and the howling of the wind:

"Look at its mouth."

Sunny turned his head a little and watched.

Far below them, the centipede twisted its long neck and convulsed, heaving. Then, it opened its maw and vomited out a huge pile of

moist, slime-covered bones. For a few moments, it looked as if the abomination was having problems digesting its prey… then, however, the pile of bones moved, slowly coalescing into a nightmarish, misshapen creature.

The revolting bone monster rose shakily to its varied limbs and staggered away, soon disappearing beneath the water. Looking at the surface of the lake, Sunny frowned… how many of these creatures had the centipede created already?

He lingered for a moment, then glanced at Jet.

"It's a Corrupted Tyrant."

She grimaced.

"Yeah… seems that way."

Soul Reaper cautiously opened her backpack and took out several bulky devices. Those were sensor arrays and recorders the army had issued to them, all based on complicated spelltech technology. The bulk mostly came from various isolating agents the designers wrapped the sensitive internals in, hoping to negate the detrimental effects of the Call.

Sadly, the interference of the nearby Gate was too strong for the spelltech equipment to achieve anything. After several minutes of fruitless attempts to gather data, Jet sighed, glanced at Sunny, and shook her head.

He gave her a shrug.

"Contact Army Command, then."

She remained motionless for a few moments, then moved away from the edge of the smokestack's lip and activated her military comm. The static noise must have been dreadful, but Jet still managed to deliver a message:

"HQ, this is Recon Four and Recon Nine. We are at the mission site, target visual confirmed, threat level core-five. Requesting analyst support."

Soul Reaper waited for a few moments, then raised three fingers into the air. That meant they had to wait for three minutes.

'Fast… HQ is either not too busy today, or sees this mission as a top priority.'

The former seemed unlikely, so it was probably the latter.

With a sigh, he summoned a Memory. Soon, a circle of green patinated bronze appeared in his hands, with a lens of roughly polished crystal encased within.

This antique looking glass was both pretty simple and interesting in function — it was a twin Memory. Somewhere in the army headquarters, there was an Awakened wielding an identical circle of patina-covered bronze, and the two were connected. That allowed the diviners and other analysts to extend their senses across the continent, even if the technological solutions failed.

Memories like this were rare and extremely precious, but each of the scouts serving in the Special Reconnaissance Unit had been issued one.

Sunny shifted slightly and aimed the looking glass at the distant centipede. A couple of minutes later, he sensed the Memory reaching for his essence, and poured a generous amount of it into the murky crystal. The connection was established.

Jet crawled back and pressed herself into the cold alloy by his side. After a few seconds, she sent Sunny a mental message:

"They're looking."

Down in the ruins, the ghastly centipede heaved out another bone monstrosity and swayed its head lightly, as if sensing some disturbance. Both Sunny and Jet froze, holding their breaths. Shivering in the wind, he made a miserable face.

'That's so unfair. I'm the only one who actually needs to breathe…'

A few minutes passed in tense silence. Then, a few more.

Eventually, Sunny felt the bronze circle fall asleep. The pull on his essence disappeared, as well. At that moment, Jet glanced at him.

"Seems like Army Command is on edge about that thing. They need some time to arrange an appropriate response, though. We're to stay here and observe, reporting immediately if it starts moving."

Sunny sighed, then looked around. At that height, the wind was strong and chilly. There was no shelter on the alloy lip of the giant chimney, and the acrid smell could still be felt here, permeating the air.

He shook his head in resignation.

"Great. I'll take a nap then."

Jet blinked a couple of times.

"Hey, how come you get to sleep first? I haven't slept in a week!"

Sunny stared at her gloomily, then sighed again.

"Fine. You go first. I'll keep an eye on the Tyrant."

Soul Reaper flashed him a smile, then turned on her side, put the backpack under her head, and seemed to immediately pass out.

Sunny was left to observe the appalling giant centipede alone. He chewed on his lip.

'Why does she even need to sleep? She's dead!'

Sadly, Jet was already blissfully asleep.

The tyrant methodically continued to create bone puppets, seemingly oblivious to the fact that it was being watched. The mysterious being hiding in another smokestack similarly remained passive.

A few hours passed. Sunny patiently waited until his shift was over, then woke up Jet and handed the responsibility of keeping watch on the Tyrant to her.

Tired and bored, he tried to get comfortable on the cold alloy and closed his eyes.

…Seemingly a second later, Jet shook him awake.

"It's on the move."

Sunny rubbed his eyes, then groggily looked down. The enormous centipede was slithering through the shallow water, and the surface of the lake around it was boiling. Hundreds of bone abominations were following the palid creature… much more than he had expected there to be.

'Crap…'

Soul Reaper was already reporting to Army Command. Half a dozen seconds later, she started crawling away from the edge.

"They are sending two entire companies to deal with it… the Wolves and the Nightsingers. We are to follow the thing and inform Army Command on its movements, then rendezvous with the assault force and help them take the abomination down."

Sunny was already moving, the bronze looking glass dissolving into a stream of sparks in his hand. Despite the perilous situation, a crooked smile appeared on his face.

'The Wolves and the Nightsingers, huh? It seems I'll get to spend some quality time with Effie and Kai soon….'

Chapter-1084: Following the Tyrant

For the next few days, Sunny and Jet stealthily pursued the Skull Centipede. These days were long, tense, and perilous — not only did they have to brave the wilderness, but they also had to keep up with the ghastly abomination while not being seen or sensed by it. On a few occasions, they had almost been discovered, barely managing to salvage the situation at the last moment.

Sunny was not sure what would have happened if the creature had found them. With Saint supporting the two scouts from the shadows, they at least had a slim chance of slaying the Tyrant… but a battle like that would be a dire one. It would have had to be one of those battles where he was forced to put everything on the line, only surviving by the skin of his teeth.

In the past, Sunny had fought plenty of battles like that. He had grown so used to walking the thin line between life and death that he did not even consider such things unusual anymore. That mad balancing act was just par for the course… however, he also knew that he would not remain on the winning side forever. If he kept risking everything, his luck was bound to run out one day.

After Falcon Scott, his way of thinking about things shifted. Sunny was now much more experienced, and with that experience came cold, calculating prudence.

His chances of defeating the Skull Centipede and its army of bone abominations would be much higher with the support of two entire companies of Awakened, and so, he was determined to meet this enemy on a battlefield of his choosing, with the odds stacked in his favor as much as the circumstances allowed.

Jet was of the same mind. They followed the plan and put all their

effort into remaining hidden.

The centipede slithered across the vast plains of East Antarctica, eviscerating everything in its path. It had no mercy for the other Nightmare Creatures, slaughtered swarms of them like helpless ants. After each massacre, the giant abomination would devour the corpses of its prey and coil its body into a macabre burrow of skulls, then wreathe and spew out more bone fiends.

The centipede's army continued to grow as it advanced through the wilderness. With each day, Sunny and Jet grew became more and more despondent… it had been hard to tell at the start, but now, there was no denying it.

The tyrant's course put it on a direct collision course with one of the siege capitals in East Antarctica. Each human stronghold on the continent was surrounded by vast masses of frenzied Nightmare Creatures, and even more dead ones. Tall piles of bodies covered the killing fields, growing with each passing day.

If the Skull Centipede was allowed to launch an attack on a siege capital, it would already be bad enough. However, if it managed to gain access to all those corpses… the strength of its army would increase exponentially, and the threat posed by the creature would explode in magnitude.

By then, only the intervention of a Saint would prevent a disaster. The Saints, however, were already busy racing endlessly from place to place, solving one crisis after another without rest.

Which was why it was important to stop the abomination as soon as possible.

On the fourth day of the pursuit, the centipede clashed with a whole horde of Nightmare Creatures, butchering hundreds of them and scaring the rest away. It dragged its massive body onto the battlefield, then got to the grisly business of consuming all the mangled bodies. One dead abomination after another disappeared into its massive maw, emotionlessly swallowed by the dreadful Tyrant.

Sunny and Jet were observing the process from a safe distance as they hid between two enormous boulders. On the ground between them lay a scattering of bleeding carcasses — they themselves had engaged in a short and gruesome fight with a pack of Nightmare Creatures just minutes ago. Now that a suitable shelter was cleared, they could rest easy for a few hours.

Sunny frowned.

"It killed too many this time. Considering how long it takes to create a bone soldier… I'd say we'll be stuck here for a full day. The Tyrant's army will grow by a lot."

Jet shrugged.

"The more it is delayed, the better. Army Command will have time to prepare."

She watched the giant centipede devour its victims for a few moments, then took a few steps back and contacted the headquarters to make a report. Soon after that, Soul Reaper's icy blue eyes suddenly gleamed.

"Understood."

She deactivated her comm and looked at Sunny with a grin.

"It's happening. The welcoming party has already arrived. We need to overtake the monstrosity, meet up with them, and prepare the festivities."

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

"Finally."

A hunt like this one was not easy to arrange. Simply deploying troops outside the siege capital was a dangerous task by now — the wilderness was teeming with numerous Nightmares Creatures, and an expedition force risked drowning in a horde of them before even reaching the intended target. It took a lot of courage and competence to navigate a course through the enemy territory.

If the target was on the move, the task only grew that much harder. Luckily, this time, Army Command was receiving constant updates on the creature's location from Sunny and Jet, so tracking its path had been easier.

And now, finally, almost every piece was in place. All that remained was for the scouts to join the assault force and spring the trap on the menacing Tyrant.

Sunny smiled.

"Let's go, then."

They silently abandoned their shelter and made a wide circle around the location of the Skull Centipede, then moved away with as much speed as they could allow themselves without risking attracting the attention of migrating hordes of Nightmare Creatures.

Half a day later, Sunny and Jet arrived at the shore of a wide river. The landscape made it so that there weren't many places to cross it for many kilometers around, with only a single ford formed by a scattering of giant boulders.

As they traversed the river, jumping from one stone to another, Sunny's comm suddenly came alive. A familiar voice came through the static.

"...well it isn't… frog… welcome…"

Some of it got swallowed up by the interference, but the last word was very easy to discern:

"...doofus..."

Sunny stopped for a moment and looked at the opposite bank of the river, where a tall figure suddenly rose from the ground.

Effie waved her hand and grinned.

"Ah, venerable Master Sunless! How nice of you to pay a visit!"

Chapter-1085: Wolf Army

Sunny and Jet looked like quite the pair. Both were wearing black, which made for a stark contrast with their pale skin and raven hair… granted, Soul Reaper looked more imposing in her fitting black leather armor. Sunny, on the other hand, wore a simple silk tunic and a pair of dainty shoes. He was also unarmed.

…Actually, he was perhaps the more threatening of the two. People were used to seeing Awakened wear suits of impregnable armor and wield powerful weapons. It was the sight of someone who didn't feel the need to do so, even in the deadly reaches of East Antarctica, that was truly frightening.

He made the last jump, landing softly on the ground not too far away from Effie. From here, Sunny could sense hundreds of shadows somewhere nearby. He looked around, noticing mundane soldiers and Awakened hidden here and there along the river shore, all keeping watch on the surrounding area.

The First Irregular Company had numbered forty-two Awakened and seven Masters. The two companies Effie and Kai commanded, however, were different. Unlike the special unit Sunny had belonged to, these were companies meant for general combat.

Each of them consisted of close to a hundred Awakened and ten times that many mundane soldiers, complete with a platoon of mighty MWPs and a robust stable of specialized vehicles that ranged from heavy artillery to support and resupply.

Two of these companies together made for a small army.

Effie walked over, a wide smile on her face.

"Sunny! Long time no see!"

She looked… quite impactful. His friend had always been a sight to behold, with her impressively tall stature, athletic build, and generous figure. Now, however, Effie resembled an incarnation of a beautiful war deity much more than she resembled a mere mortal. The main reason for this was her armor.

It was as though Effie had been dipped in liquid steel, which then clung tightly to her body, tracing every toned, graceful line of it. Sunny had once thought that the Undying Chain felt like a second layer of skin… however, in his case, that was simply a metaphor. The armor of the vibrant huntress, on the contrary, could be described the same way quite literally.

There was a piece of white cloth tied around her waist, and another one covering her chest, but other than that, Effie's whole body was exposed and seemed as if it had been cast of lustrous steel. Only her head was uncovered, for now.

That armor, of course, was the Transcendent Memory she had received after slaying one of the immortal Chain Lord of the Kingdom of Hope, the Sun Prince.

Sunny coughed.

Just looking at Effie would make one's blood run hot. But that wasn't all… currently, she had not even activated her Ascended Ability. Once she did, the fire burning in the hearts of the soldiers who saw her would become quite real, coursing through their veins and granting them actual power. It was as though Raised by Wolves was sharing some of her astonishing physical might with her followers.

An involuntary smile found its way onto Sunny's face.

"...What are you talking about? We saw each other two weeks ago."

Effie shook her head energetically.

"That doesn't count! Every time you come to the island, you and Cassie immediately slink to the basement to spend a few quality hours closely studying the floor. The two of us, though, haven't had proper fun in ages."

She grinned and then shifted her gaze to Jet, who was listening to their conversation with a strange expression on her face.

"Oh, and welcome to you too, Ms. Soul Reaper. Thanks for keeping this doofus alive. I know he's a handful."

After saying that last part, Effie lingered for a moment… and winked.

Jet blinked a couple of times. The two of them met a few times, but she had not really been exposed to Effie's personality before. Sunny couldn't tell if she was bewildered or amused.

Eventually, Soul Reaper smiled a little.

"Sure. Call me Jet."

He stared at them with a glum expression.

"Keeping me alive, really? That's funny… don't you have a habit of occasionally trying to kill me?"

Soul Reaper's smile turned into a grin.

"Oh, come on… I haven't tried to kill you in at least a couple of months. So I don't know where this is coming from."

Sunny shook his head, then glanced at Effie and smiled.

"...It's good to see you too, Effie."

He looked around and asked:

"Where's the other one?"

She nodded, then gestured for them to follow.

"He's asleep. Now that the battle is drawing close, the two of us take turns sleeping. Both of us need to be fresh for the battle with the Tyrant, while at least one has to be awake at all times before that, so… that arrangement works."

They walked up the slope of the shore. Gradually, the hidden camp of the small army revealed itself, with hundreds of soldiers soberly

preparing for the upcoming battle. Awakened, mundane soldiers, MWP pilots, operators of combat vehicles… all of them were throwing wide-eyed glances at the three Masters.

"Who is that with the boss? Are those the SRU scouts?"

"...Is it me, or is our boss acting too friendly with that guy?"

"G—gods… isn't that Soul Reaper Jet?!"

"Holy hell! That's Soul Reaper and Devil!"

"No way… let me see!"

"I heard the two of them fought a Corrupted Titan in the Antarctic Center… that can't be right, can it? They wouldn't be alive if they did…"

"Soul Reaper might be tough… but our boss is definitely tougher..."

"I once saw Devil slaughter an entire swarm of Nightmare Creatures without lifting a finger. He just stood there, and they were all shredded into little pieces. I swear to gods, it's true!"

Sunny ignored the whispers and followed Effie. His shadows, however, took a good look around — he was about to go into battle side by side with these people, so he had to know all about them.

The soldiers of the two companies looked competent, determined, and in high spirits. The Wolves and the Nightsingers were technically not counted as special forces, but among the rank and file of the Evacuation Army, they had already earned the reputation of elite units. They were led by two of the most fearsome Masters in the world, after all.

The soldiers were mixed among each other, but funnily enough, it was easy to see which belonged to which company. The Wolves were more boisterous, lively, and rough around the edges. The Nightsingers were more calm, reserved, and good-natured. It was as if they had assumed the personalities of their leaders.

Sunny smiled with the corner of his mouth, then shook his head.

They walked along a row of camouflaged tents and approached a particular one, which looked no different from all the others. Effie suddenly made a fist and banged it against her bare thigh, producing a loud metallic ring.

"Wake up, birdie! The most honest person in two worlds is here!"

Chapter-1086: Shared Pain

There was some rustling inside the tent, and then Kai emerged from it, looking as handsome and dazzling as ever. No… even more so.

Sunny's face became a little dull.

His friend had reached borderline criminal levels of attractiveness after becoming a Master, mesmerizing most mundane humans by simply appearing in front of them, but Sunny had thought that a couple of months in the mud and muck of Antarctica would rub some of that glamour off.

However, he had been sorely mistaken.

If anything, Kai only became more captivating. His natural charm had acquired a hint of reserved military valiance, becoming more subdued, but also much more arresting. His green eyes were still as electric as ever, but now, there was a quiet, almost melancholic depth to them that made one deeply desire to comfort and console the young man. Those eyes were nothing short of compelling.

Kai smiled, making all three of them — Sunny, Effie, and Jet — hold their breaths for a moment.

"Sunny! Ascended Jet. It is so good to see you."

Even his voice was like a soothing melody.

'That bastard…'

Sunny wasn't even angry about how stunning his friend was. What really disheartened him was what Kai was wearing.

The archer was clad in a beautiful suit of ivory armor that seemed to be made out of impregnable scales, with a few insets of burnished

bronze blazing between them with reflected sunlight. It was tied at the waist by a sash of burnt umber color, which emphasized the rich auburn splendor of his hair.

The armor was made of dragon scales, and was a Transcendent Memory Kai had received after slaying the Ivory Dragon Sevirax.

Both Effie and Kai had come into possession of a Transcendent Armor in the Second Nightmare.

…Sunny used to have an armor like that, too, which he had gotten for killing Solvane for the first time. But, of course, it had been destroyed by Goliath.

And now he was the only person of the three without one!

'Ah, that really grinds my gears…'

Sunny winced, but was then distracted from his resigned self-pity by Jet, who smiled and stretched her hand out for a handshake.

"Ascended Nightingale. I don't think I've had the pleasure of meeting you before.

Indeed, this was the first time the two of them met. Sunny glanced at Soul Reaper bleakly.

'At least she is not a fangirl. Like someone I know…'

Still… Jet had not even tried to shake Effie's hand. What was up with that?

The four of them exchanged a few words and headed for a larger tent that stood nearby, serving as the improvised strategy room for the small army. As they walked, Sunny briefly clasped forearm with Kai.

"How are you doing?"

After the… the things he had experienced in Falcon Scott, Sunny held a somewhat different view of the charming archer, and of what his friend had shared with him in the Sanctuary of Noctis.

Back then, he knew that Kai was deeply hurt by what had transpired in the Ivory City, both physically and mentally. He had been a centurion who led soldiers into a war against Solvane's zealots, only to watch his soldiers die and disappear in the flames of the dragon… and then be crippled by those flames himself.

Sunny had thought that the pain of defeat and becoming a cripple was what haunted his friend the most. But after experiencing the burden… and privilege… of being in command, and learning how it felt to watch his people die…

Now, he thought differently.

Kai smiled softly.

"I am doing well. Thank you for asking, Sunny… but I really am. I… feel like I'm in the right place."

Sunny nodded, thinking that he understood. Kai had always had these naive notions of what was right and wrong, and what a good person was meant to do with the power all Awakened possessed. For someone like him, coming to Antarctica was, perhaps, a very sincere endeavor.

He glanced at Effie.

Come to think of it, the merry huntress had lost people in the Nightmare, too. She watched all the other girls perish under the ruthless training methods of the War Maidens, powerless to save any of them.

Even Cassie had experienced powerlessness and loss, with all the other priestesses and people of the Night Temple — including her cherished mentor, the One in the North — ending up slaughtered by Mordret.

All of them had felt it.

…Did Nephis feel the same? Probably not.

But then again, no one knew what she had lived through in the Second Nightmare. Changing Star was strangely reticent about that

particular ordeal.

They entered the tent, gathering around a fold-out table that had a small holographic projector placed on it. A topographical map of the area was projected into the air, with their location and the last known whereabouts of the Skull Centipede marked on it in red.

Sunny, however, paid it no attention, still lost in his thoughts. After a while, he shook them off and honed in on the conversation.

Kai was speaking.

"...there is simply no other path. The creature will definitely try to cross the river near the ford, and so, that is where we will ambush it."

Jet shook her head.

"You are mistaken. It is large enough to ford the river anywhere. Its minions don't breathe, so they can simply walk along the bottom and crawl out of the water on the other side. The current is nowhere near strong enough to be an obstacle for them."

The charming archer sighed, then nodded.

"That is correct. Which was why I said near the ford, not directly using the ford… the landscape is going to push the Tyrant into this general area, but we have no way of knowing where exactly it will enter the river."

Sunny frowned, already sensing where this was going.

"So… what is the plan, then?"

Effie chuckled.

"Well, what else? Since we don't know where it's going, we'll just have to make sure that it comes to where we want it to come."

Sunny let out a resigned sigh.

"...So, who is going to be the bait?"

Effie awkwardly scratched the back of her head.

"I mean… you don't have to, if you don't want to…"

He remained silent for a moment, then scoffed.

Kai smiled a little.

"Honestly, it can be any of us. Oh… I'm sorry, Master Jet, I'm afraid I'm not entirely familiar with your capabilities. What I meant to say was that Effie, Sunny, and I all have ways of making sure that we survive leading the creature to the ambush. So, any of us three can go."

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"No… I'll go. I have to contribute at an earlier stage of the battle. Because I might not be of much use at the later stage."

It was true.

With how close Sunny was to forming the fifth core, chances were that he would pass the threshold right in the middle of a furious melee.

If that happened, he would have to struggle to simply stay alive… as for being useful, he was not sure if he'd be able to do anything at all.

Chapter-1087: War Masters

The pallid centipede was slithering across a desolate landscape, followed by an army of abominable bone creatures. Its massive body tore forward, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. The ground was pierced and upturned by its thousand sharp legs, the ancient boulders shattered, the brooks of clear water spoiled with and turned into streams of poison.

Soon, a wide river appeared in the distance. The ghastly tyrant did not slow down, continuing its ruinous advance. Then, however…

The monstrous centipede slowed down.

Its appalling head swiveled, rising into the air. Its harrowing maw opened. The branches of the dead trees that served as the creature's horns swayed lightly in the wind.

The wind had brought with it a strange sound.

The distant weeping of a flute.

The centipede lingered for a few moments, then suddenly changed direction, lunging toward the source of the discordant sound. It did not have eyes, but the black eye sockets of the countless skulls forming its carapace seemed to radiate dark, ineffable malice.

The Corrupted Tyrant pursued the source of the simple melody. However, the flute player remained elusive like a ghost. Sometimes, the creature seemed to draw near the player, but he always managed to slip away at the last moment. All it found were empty shadows.

However, at some point, the pursuit came to an end.

The hideous centipede had almost reached the river by that point. In front of it was a natural ford formed by a line of enormous boulders,

with only their tops emerging from the water. On the opposite side of the river, a lone human was sitting cross-legged on a stone, playing a strange emerald flute.

It was a young man with pale skin and dark hair, wearing a tunic of black silk.

Sunny did not pay any attention to the harrowing centipede and continued to play the flute. His fingers moved nimbly, but the melody he created was… pretty rough, to say the least.

He sighed.

'I thought I improved… but maybe not…'

On the other shore, the Tyrant froze for a second, then rushed forward. The creature dove into the river, raising a towering wave, and its soldiers followed. Some of the bone abominations jumped heavily across the boulders, most simply dove into the cold water after their ruler.

Sunny waited for a moment, then dismissed the Bone Singer and looked at the sky. The sun was still visible, but since it was close to the horizon, its light was dim.

As he watched, several things happened at the same time.

First, a series of explosions thundered, demolishing the boulders of the ford. Giant fountains of water rose into the air. Second, hundreds of human figures rose from the trenches dug higher up the slope. Third, a barrage of artillery shells and tungsten rounds descended upon the bone abominations from beyond the hills.

The creatures shuddered, but resisted the mundane implements of war. Their progress, however, was slowed.

That was when the Awakened attacked.

Numerous enchanted arrows and magical projectiles rained on the soldiers of the Skull Centipede's army. This time, the damage was apparent.

A hulking creature that had just fallen into the river exploded into hundreds of bone fragments. Another lost a limb. Yet another one was suddenly covered by a layer of sizzling amber liquid that corroded the bones, eating through them like acid… and more, much more.

But that was just the start. Even though that initial salvo destroyed dozens of dreadful abominations, there were many hundreds of them left.

There was the Tyrant itself, as well.

A beautiful figure that seemed to be cast of steel appeared on the slope in front of the trenches, wielding a spear and a large round shield. Her voice boomed across the battlefield, filling the hearts of the soldiers with maddened fervor:

"Wolves! Prepare! For war!"

Sunny turned his head and glanced at Effie, feeling his blood boil from her battle cry. As he did, a strange thing happened… he suddenly felt exhilarating power rush into his body. It was as though he was suddenly as mighty as a ferocious beast, as resilient as a granite wall, and as sharp as a steel sword.

And that was not just a feeling. His strength, speed, endurance, and resilience did indeed undergo a striking improvement. It was as though his body had received a comprehensive overhaul, becoming so much more suited for battle.

'Incredible…'

Every time he was exposed to Effie's Ascended Ability, Sunny couldn't help but feel awed. For him, who had already enjoyed the augmentation of the shadows, the physical boost was not that pronounced. But for the Awakened soldiers, and especially mundane humans… it must have been a true blessing.

The most frightening part, however, was that this Ability had no limit to how many people could be empowered by it. Anyone who saw Effie and was deemed an ally by her would receive its benefit. Their

number did not even affect the rate with which she consumed essence.

The only detriment, albeit a small one, was that the soldiers had to maintain a line of sight with their commander to enjoy the boon of her power. However, considering that Effie almost always preferred to fight on the frontline, that was usually not a problem.

Just as he had expected, the eyes of the soldiers ignited with burning resolve at the sound of her voice. The soldiers of her company suddenly raised their heads and let out boisterous howls, acting like an army of actual wolves.

And then, another voice joined them… this one sonorous and clear, easily drowning out all the rest.

Kai's voice.

When Sunny heard it, his heart suddenly shook. Instantly, all the unnecessary thoughts were erased from his head, leaving only the pure, flaming, indomitable desire to do battle.

Even though this change was not physical, it might have been even more profound than the empowerment of Effie's Aspect… because it affected the heart. Even Sunny, for whom the effect was somewhat muted because of how guarded his mind and soul were, felt incredibly inspired. The clarity bestowed by Kai's call would do wonders for the soldiers in this battle.

Sunny shook his head slightly.

'Scary…'

Kai's Ability was just too terrifying. An Ascended would most likely be able to resist it to some degree, but mere Awakened had no choice but to be compelled. As for mundane humans? If the handsome enchanter chose to misuse his powers, they would do anything he told them to. They would happily end their lives if he asked.

Luckily, Kai would never do that. Instead, he used his power to inspire the soldiers and make them stronger.

With Sunny serving as a perfect scout, Effie strengthening the bodies of the soldiers, and Kai inspiring their hearts, the threat of the Corrupted Tyrant suddenly did not seem overwhelming.

As the head of the Skull Centipede emerged from the water, it was met with a furious onslaught of attacks.

Strengthened by their two leaders, the small army was burning with the desire… and ability… to win this battle.

Chapter-1088: Force Multiplier

Before, the future seemed grim for the expedition force of the Evacuation Army. Even though they numbered more than two thousand soldiers, with two hundred Awakened and four Masters ready to fight at the front, the enemy was just too domineering.

The Corrupted Tyrant itself was tremendously dangerous. The army of bone monstrosities was no less threatening.

However, both Effie and Kai were incredible sources of strength, acting as force multipliers for the whole regiment. With their help, the power of the soldiers soared, almost balancing the scale.

Sunny's and Jet's efforts were no less important. Thanks to them, the two companies had been able to choose the battlefield and prepare an ambush. Terrain advantage was extremely valuable, and so was the foreknowledge of what the enemy was capable of.

That last part was, perhaps, the most precious. The two scouts had not only gathered intelligence about the location of the enemy and the number of minions under its rule. They had also provided the analysts and diviners of the army with an opportunity to study the Tyrant.

Thanks to that, the human force did not have to go into the battle blind. Even though they did not know every detail of what the Skull Centipede was capable of, they did know the most important parts.

…For example, they knew that the confluence of the power that the giant abomination possessed was, surprisingly, hidden in the two dead skeletal trees that grew from its head, serving as the Tyrant's crown and horns.

In fact, Army Command had gone as far as to suggest that the true abomination was not the centipede itself, but the network of tree

roots that permeated its monstrous skull, growing through the creature's brain matter.

As such, the small army's first goal was to destroy one, or better yet both of these trees. Without them, the Tyrant would most likely lose the ability to control its bone soldiers, as well as access to its most terrifying powers.

But… it was more easily said than done.

And Sunny currently had other things to worry about, because the centipede was going directly for him.

Ignoring the squall of bullets and the rain of arrow, it rose from the river like a mountain of skulls and lunged straight at him, the giant maw opening like an abyssal gate.

Sunny blinked.

'Are my flute skills really that atrocious? Listen... there's really no need to be that angry...'

A moment before the dreadful Tyrant crashed into the boulder he was sitting on, Sunny leaned back and dissipated into the shadows. The centipede plunged down, shattering the ancient stone and turning it to dust. Stone shards and a great deal of dirt flew into the air, rising like a cloud.

Sunny finished a backward roll much further up the slope, appearing behind the trenches and the mass of soldiers. He rose, flicked a few pieces of dust off his tunic, and glanced in the direction of the giant abomination.

The Skull Centipede turned its head in the direction of the firing soldiers, its jaw still hanging open. Then, its enormous body tensed, ready to shoot forward.

Before it could, however, something flashed through the air and impacted against the Tyrant's head… the mysterious projectile was none other than Effie, who had used her own body as a siege ram. After rushing through the battlefield like a hurricane, she jumped and made her body into a ball, hiding it behind the round shield.

When the Dusk Shard struck the Tyrant, numerous skulls were instantly pulverized into bone dust. However, even more were revealed, becoming visible through the crack in the morbid carapace.

The force of the impact was so tremendous that it not only slowed the centipede down, it actually threw the abomination back, pushing it back into the river.

Effie herself was tossed to the ground and landed in a roll, jumping back to her feet a moment later. Her sculpted steel body did not look damaged at all. If anything, the huntress looked as exuberant and robust as ever.

As her war cry resounded across the battlefield, the first wave of the hulking bone abominations clashed against the line of Awakened.

A ferocious melee exploded into a cacophony of ear-piercing noise. The tide of Nightmare Creatures seemed unstoppable, as if it would easily wash the human fighters away in a wave of desperation and blood… but it didn't.

The first reason for that was Jet, who threw herself into the flood of abominations a few moments before the clash and broke the enemy's momentum. Her naginata easily passed through the layers of bone, destroying the rotten souls of the Tyrant's minions.

Both the bone puppets and Soul Reaper herself could be considered living dead… however, even among the dead, she was an exalted existence.

The second reason was the Awakened themselves. Even though most of the ghastly abominations were Fallen, it barely looked as if there was a gap of power between them and the human fighters. Empowered by Raised by Wolves and emboldened by Nightingale, the soldiers fought with might and ferocity that was far beyond what they should have been capable of.

It was really quite astonishing to see.

Sunny shifted a little.

'Time for me to enter the fray as well, I guess.'

He had to act restrained in this battle… however, that did not mean that he couldn't do anything.

More and more bone fiends were crawling out of the river, and the Skull Centipede itself had already recovered from Effie's devastating blow. It was lunging forward once again, this time aiming for the ironclad huntress.

Sunny opened a leather satchel that hung on the silk cord tied around his waist, and took out a small, intricately engraved stone lantern. Then, he tossed it across the battlefield, aiming for the line where the shore met the cold water.

As soon as the Shadow Lantern landed, it was as though all light was devoured from the wide area around it. Many bone abominations entered the sphere of darkness… however, none of them emerged again, as if swallowed by the shadows.

Well, of course they didn't. After all, out there in the darkness, unseen, Saint was already waiting for them with the Sin of Solace in her hand.

After unleashing her on the battlefield, Sunny concentrated on using Shadow Manifestation to reduce pressure on the soldiers. He tried not to destroy any of the bone abominations himself, maiming and suppressing them instead.

Despite his efforts, however, a generous stream of shadow fragments poured into his soul, threatening to render him defenseless too soon.

Sunny frowned, then looked in the direction where Effie was trying to distract the Skull Centipede and prevent it from reaching the trenches. She was holding the Tyrant at bay, barely… for now…

A dark grimace appeared on his face.

'It's all up to Kai, then.'

High above the battlefield, hidden by the cold radiance of the sun, a small black dot was slowly growing larger…

Chapter-1089: Falling Star

Effie was having a hard time standing her ground against the giant centipede… in fact, she was barely holding on. Even though a furious barrage of bullets, enchanted arrows, and magical projectiles was raining on the ghastly carapace of skulls, the abomination did not seem slowed down at all.

Its massive body moved with dire speed, thousands of scythe-like legs tearing up the ground with each motion.

The difference in size between the Tyrant and the fearless huntress was just too big. Effie's only saving grace was that her body, despite being hundreds of times smaller than that of the ghastly centipede, seemed to contain truly astounding strength.

She was incredibly swift and agile, as well, dashing around with stunning speed to dodge the crushing blows of the monstrous creature. Above everything else, the huntress was all but invulnerable — her innate resilience was reinforced by two Aspect Abilities, and then strengthened by a Transcendent armor on top of that.

She had received several glancing blows from the abomination, which would have turned almost any other Master into a broken corpse. Effie, however, was able to shake them off and continue to fight.

...Of course, there was no such thing as true invulnerability. The huntress was fine for now, but she was still dancing with death.

The round shield she wielded possessed an enchantment called [Indomitable], which functioned similar to Sunny's own [Feather of Truth] and allowed Effie to change its weight at will. Her spear was not able to deal serious wounds to the Tyrant, but its strikes must have stung — Sunny saw the creature recoiling after the huntress managed to land a solid blow.

…All that allowed Raised by Wolves to tie down the Skull Centipede, at least for a short while.

However, it did not mean that she would win.

It took all Effie had to simply match the menace of the Corrupted Tyrant's massive body — all her Abilities, all her skill, and all her powerful Memories — while the abomination had not revealed any of its powers yet.

Once it did, the situation would inevitably change.

And that moment… had already come.

As Sunny watched, Effie managed to push the centipede back once again. The shockwave of the impact threw her back, as well — the huntress slid through the dirt, leaving two grooves in it. Her spear shot down, piercing the ground and bringing her to a sudden stop.

A moment later, she was already lunging forward, ready to deliver another strike… however, the Tyrant seemed to be fed up with their furious clash.

The Skull Centipede raised its appalling head, the branches of the dead trees growing from the carapace of skulls swinging in the wind. Sunny's eyes widened slightly as he felt a sudden chill run down his spine.

It was as though the wind that brushed against the skeletal branches was full of tormented whispers.

A small black dot appeared in the air between the two trees. The dot warped and twisted, collapsing in on itself… and then began to grow, devouring the fabric of reality itself. It seemed as if an abyssal gate was starting to open in the air above the creature's head.

'Crap!'

Sunny instantly knew that nothing good was going to happen if the circle of darkness was allowed to finish forming. He made a move to step forward…

But at that moment, a stream of light tore the sky asunder, falling from somewhere high above with inconceivable speed. It streaked across the battlefield like a flaming comet and crossed paths with the centipede's head, exploding with blinding radiance.

A low boom resounded, followed by the sound of shattering wood.

Kai had arrived.

The plan of the battle the four Masters had come up with assigned each of them an important role. Sunny was responsible for luring the Tyrant to the ambush site and creating an obstacle for the bone fiends crawling out of the river. Jet was meant to lead the defenders and make sure that the trenches were not overrun.

Effie's role was to stall the centipede — and, more importantly, distract it. But it was Kai who was the key to their success... or failure.

The whole plan depended on whether the Tyrant would be able to unleash its harrowing powers. To prevent it from happening and reduce the Skull Centipede to a mere giant beast, the trees growing from its head had to be destroyed. That was what Kai had to accomplish.

He had hidden himself high in the sky and bid his time, waiting for an opportune moment. Then, the archer plunged down, burning his essence and using gravity to reach truly astonishing speed.

And now, he delivered his attack, using that speed to close the trap they had set. The flaming comet was Kai himself, and he held a slender, shining saber in his hand.

All of it happened in the blink of an eye. The streak of light crossed the creature's head, something flashed, and then a loud explosion boomed, washing over the battlefield.

A split second later, Kai fell into the river. His speed was still so tremendous that he slid across the surface of the water without plunging into it — and only slowed down after being pushed a hundred meters away from the shore.

The head of the Skull Centipede, meanwhile, was flung to the side. One of the dead trees crowning it was completely shattered, its trunk exploding into thousands of sharp splinters. The circle of darkness collapsed and disappeared without a trace, never receiving the chance to fully form.

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

'It worked…'

The Tyrant opened its maw, letting out a blood-chilling screech.

The bone fiends trembled, becoming disorganized and somewhat sluggish.

The soldiers roared with dark glee, invigorated by the sight of the giant creature losing one of its horns.

Effie was already advancing, her spear ready to strike.

Kai had managed to regain his balance and pushed himself off the surface of the water, shooting back into the sky and summoning his bow.

A black arrow suddenly shot out of the cloud of darkness surrounding the Shadow Lantern. Empowered by Saint's Transcended strength and the [Death Dealer] enchantment, the arrow struck the neck of the Tyrant with harrowing force, annihilating layers of skulls and ripping a huge chunk of flesh out of it.

…However, Sunny did not pay any of it much attention.

Because right at that moment, the Spell whispered into his ear:

[You have slain a Fallen Monster, Malignant Root's Sapling.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny froze, his face turning deathly pale.

'Here we go again…'

The voice of the Spell grew louder.

[...Your shadow is overflowing with power.]

Chapter-1090: Tyrant

[Your shadow is overflowing with power.]

[Your shadow is taking shape.]

[Your shadow…]

Sunny did not have to summon the runes to know that he had finally accomplished his goal… after absorbing thousands of shadow fragments, his soul was ready to form a new Shadow Core.

His fifth one. He was about to become a Tyrant.

A conflicting mess of emotions rose in his heart. Of course, Sunny felt a sense of joy and triumph — his power was about to take a significant jump, after all. The bleak, dreadful months he had spent in Antarctica, enduring hardships and grisly defeats, made this moment possible. In a sense, this was his reward, and so, the invisible scars he had been left with were not for nothing.

On the other hand, this boon came at a very unfortunate moment. In the past, Sunny had been mostly able to time his advancements in a way that allowed him to go through the process in relatively safe conditions. A battlefield where hundreds of Awakened were fighting against an army of Fallen Nightmare Creatures and a Corrupted Tyrant, however, was in no way safe.

And on top of that… he had already gone through this ordeal three times. He knew how much it was going to hurt.

'Hell yes! And also… damn it!'

Sunny glanced at the Skull Centipede, who was reeling from the dreadful blow dealt to it by Saint's arrow. A huge chunk of flesh was missing from its neck, with bone dust and rivers of fetid blood

spilling into the river. Effie was moments away from reaching the wounded abomination, her sculpted steel body glistening in the sunlight, and Kai was preparing to draw his bow.

One of the dead trees had been destroyed, which was supposed to rob the Tyrant of its most terrible powers… however, the outcome of the fight was still far away from being set in stone. A Corrupted Tyrant was still a Corrupted Tyrant. Sunny felt that Effie, Kai, and Saint had a good chance of emerging victorious from that fight, but he couldn't be sure.

Jet and the Awakened soldiers were struggling to hold back the tide of bone fiends.

Sadly, for now, there was nothing much Sunny could do to help them.

The rest of the battle was up to others to win.

As a hint of terrible pain appeared in his soul, Sunny hurriedly jumped backwards, hiding between two mounds of dug-up dirt. Two figures emerged from his shadow — one was a fearsome black stallion, the other a scrawny little imp.

He gritted his teeth and looked at his Shadows.

"Protect me."

Then, Sunny lingered for a moment and threw a glance at Nightmare. A cold smile appeared on his lips.

"Oh, and if the little bastard does something stupid… you have my permission to eat him, Nightmare."

The dark destrier snorted in calm agreement, while the imp stared at him with shocked outrage and fear.

Sunny grinned, then turned white as a sheet and swayed. His hand rose, grabbing at his chest.

'Argh… this is the worst…'

A familiar, but no less dreadful agony overwhelmed his entire being. Sunny was momentarily blinded and deafened, losing all sense of the world around him.

Something was rising from the depths of his soul, tearing at it with sharp edges. The torment of it was nothing short of exquisite. He had experienced this pain several times before… but it grew more and more unbearable with each time.

Human souls were not supposed to possess many cores. Neither were they able to sustain them. It was only because of Sunny's Divine Aspect that his soul had become stronger, growing vast and powerful enough to endure the strain. Nevertheless, this was not in its nature. Therefore… the birth of a new core brought with it immeasurable pain, with each successive one hurting more…

The first time Sunny had gone through the process, he had been rendered absolutely helpless, thrashing on the ground and wailing like a dying beast. The second time had brought him to his knees, making his screams echo in the desolate halls of the ruined Chalice Temple. The third time… Sunny had managed to remain silent.

…Up to the point when the body of the Shadowspawn he had been occupying started to change, too.

The pain had grown more intense with each new core, but Sunny had also grown more resilient. He had been through so much, and had experienced so much… the journey through the endless procession of nightmares alone would have been enough to drive anyone mad…

And so, this time, Sunny endured.

He did not fall down, remaining on his feet. He did not scream.

He did, however, lose all track of time, and of what was happening around him.

All that remained was agonizing pain and the sensation of something being born within his soul.

It lasted for an eternity.

But then, eventually…

The eternity had ended.

Sunny realized that he could hear again. He knew that because he heard the voice of the Spell whisper into his ear softly:

[Your shadow is complete.]

And, mercifully, the pain ended.

He inhaled deeply, trembling.

He felt… stronger.

His body had become stronger. His reserves of essence had grown the most, by far.

Most importantly, he was now in possession of the fifth shadow.

And… he was a Tyrant.

'A Tyrant.'

Sunny exhaled.

A complicated emotion grasped his heart.

Finally, after years of struggling and chasing after something that often seemed unreachable, he had caught up with Nephis. Sure, she was still ahead of him by a sizable amount of fragments… but they were of the same Class now. They were both Ascended Tyrants.

Strangely enough, Sunny did not care too much.

He had wanted desperately to be as strong as Changing Star once. There had been a lot of reasons for him to harbor that desire, some better, some worse. And now that he had reached that goal…

Sunny knew that his former understanding of what real strength was had been terribly misguided. And so, he did not really care.

Still… it felt nice, to be equal to her on paper. Even if what was

written in shimmering runes was not that important.

'Now… for the important stuff.'

Sunny shifted, turning his head to observe the battlefield.

There was another Tyrant nearby, and that Tyrant posed a threat to his friends and the soldiers… so, the creature had to be dealt with.

Chapter-1091: Fifth Shadow

Sunny was still reeling from having his soul torn apart, then sewn back together. However, the battle was raging, so he had no time to recover in peace… that was fine. He was long used to fighting in the most dire conditions, anyway.

It took him only a moment to assess the situation.

It seemed that he had been out of it for quite some time. The battlefield was ravaged and upturned, with the river itself slightly changing course. Its water, which had been clear once, now seemed muddy and noxious. Effie and Kai were still fighting the ghastly centipede in the shallows, with Saint supporting them from the darkness. The three seemed to be doing fine.

The soldiers, however, were straining to hold their ground. The slope of the river shore was littered with shattered bones, and hundreds of the Tyrant's abominable minions had already been destroyed.

But there were hundreds more, and now that Saint was busy turning the Skull Centipede into a pincushion and weighing it down with the help of the [Burden of Peace] enchantment of Morgan's Warbow, there was no one to serve as the wave breaker against their tide.

There was only Jet. Soul Reaper moved like the beautiful visage of death among the bone fiends, erasing one after another from existence, but she was just one woman. No matter how fast and lethal, she couldn't be in several places at the same time.

Sunny hesitated, trying to make a decision.

His instinct was to go for the biggest threat, personally removing it from the equation. However, the Tyrant was still strong and ferocious. Even without most of its powers, the centipede was putting up a dreadful fight. It was hard to say how long it would take to

bring it down. The soldiers, meanwhile, would continue to suffer under the onslaught of the bone fiends until it did.

So what was he supposed to do? Follow his habits and race to kill the Tyrant, or act against instinct and put his trust in Effie and Kai, concentrating on reinforcing the ordinary soldiers instead?

Sunny sighed.

'Instincts are great. But humans rose above beasts for a and thanks to reason."

In the end, no matter how unnatural it felt, he could do no better than to follow the plan. The role he had been assigned was to lure the Tyrant to the ambush, and then put obstacles in the path of the bone army to make it easier on the Awakened and the mundane soldiers.

So… Sunny was going to put himself between the abominations and the humans.

Before lunging into the fray, he dismissed Nightmare and the little imp. They had already done their job by guarding him — throwing the two into the mass of Fallen enemies would do more harm than good.

Then, Sunny glanced down, at the shadows gathered on the ground in front of him.

The first four were his old companions — the gloomy, happy, creepy, and haughty fellows. The fifth one, however, was new.

The fifth shadow seemed naive and good-natured. Even though it was not as boisterous, the guy resembled the happy shadow… a little bit too much. So much, in fact, that Sunny couldn't help but feel that its amicable disposition was just a front.

And behind that front, he could sense a hint of boundless deviousness. The shadow was up to no good… it was clearly full of all kinds of mischief!

He raised his eyebrow and sighed.

"...You're a naughty one, aren't you?"

The naughty shadow stared at him, radiating nothing but innocent surprise. Eventually, the shadow shook its head with utter sincerity. It seemed a little hurt.

It was as though the shadow was saying:

"Who? Me? Oh no, of course not! I would never…"

Sunny squinted his eyes.

"Yeah... yeah, right. Well, let's go then. I don't know if you've noticed, but we're in the middle of a battle."

The shadow looked at him, then scratched the back of its head and glanced at its siblings, as if unsure what to do. When the other four shadows moved forward to wrap themselves around his body, though, it quickly followed.

A feeling of overflowing strength permeated Sunny's body. He inhaled deeply, getting used to his new limits, then caught sight of Effie breaking a dozen of the Tyrant's legs with her round shield. Instantly, his limits were expanded even further.

Sunny smiled, summoned the Cruel Sight, and dashed forward. At the same time, he used the [Blessing of Dusk] to establish a mental bond with Jet and coordinate their movements.

She moved to her right. Soul Reaper was going to be responsible for the western half of the defensive line, while Devil was going to rampage in the eastern part.

Shadows surged forward. In the next moment, the sound of breaking bones rolled over the battlefield.

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In the end, it was Kai who brought down the Skull Centipede. Saint had debilitated and slowed it down with her arrows, which gave Effie an opportunity to deliver a devastating blow to the creature's head, cracking its skull.

Of course, that alone would have never killed a Corrupted Tyrant. However, it did give Kai a chance to deal a fatal strike to the ghastly abomination.

Flying across the sky, he positioned himself above the centipede and drew his bow. This time, an arrow of incinerating flame appeared on its string. The heat of the arrow was so dreadful that it seemed as if the world itself was melting around it.

Luckily, Kai was protected by the armor made from the scales of a dragon. Unaffected by the immolating heat, he let the fiery arrow loose. It flew down like a streak of light, entering the creature's skull through the thin crack.

Then, a dreadful explosion illuminated the Tyrant's head from the inside. Tongues of flames and streams of smoke shot from its mouth, from the pit where the broken tree had been, and from the empty eyes of the countless skulls.

The centipede's own indestructible, giant skull seemed as if it was going to burst open, for a moment. But in the end, it didn't. Trailing smoke and fire from its head, the creature swayed, and then heavily crashed to the ground.

The Skull Centipede was dead.

With the Tyrant gone, its minions lost all remaining cohesion. Effie, Kai, and Saint were also freed to attack them from behind. Caught between them and the main body of the expedition force, the bone army swiftly dwindled.

It wasn't long before it was completely annihilated.

Looking at the battlefield, which was covered in broken bones, Sunny took a deep breath.

'I can't believe it. A plan actually worked. I think that's a first…'

Chapter-1092: Expeditious Retreat

The battle was over, but the soldiers had no time to relax and celebrate their victory. They did not even have time to collect the soul shards and other spoils from the army of slain abominations. Instead, as soon as the fighting ended, everyone got busy preparing for an immediate retreat.

That was the nature of the war in Antarctica. No matter what terrible of a foe you defeated, a dozen more were just beyond the horizon. They were in enemy territory. The ferocious battle against the Skull Centipede had not taken a lot of time, but it had created a lot of noise.

Already, several hordes of Nightmare Creatures were flowing across the plain, converging on the location where the battle had taken place.

Unless the expedition force wanted to drown in an endless flood of abominations, it needed to disappear as soon as possible.

Sunny, Jet, Effie, and Kai were gathered in front of the Skull Centipede's massive corpse, careful to steer clear of the water. They did not know what the poison was exactly, but the river was visibly tainted. Even in death, the Corrupted Tyrant continued to spread death and destruction.

They had just retrieved the five Transcendent soul shards from the ghastly carcass — that was the extent of the trophies the expedition force was going to carry back with it.

The huntress looked at the hundreds of dead abominations laying on the ground and sighed.

"Damn, what a pity. That would be enough for an entire cohort of Sleepers to saturate their cores."

Sunny felt a bit regretful, too. The monetary value of all these shards would have been astronomical… granted, now that the Chain of Nightmare had flooded the waking world with abominations, the price of shards was not what it had been before. He knew it from his occasional correspondence with Aiko.

He shook his head.

"That might be true, but what's the use of having all these shards if we die before reaching a siege capital?"

Kai nodded.

"Indeed. We have already reaped the main benefit — preventing the Tyrant from growing stronger and reaching one of the human settlements. Our casualties were light, too… that's a win in my book. Anything else is irrelevant."

Sunny knew that his friend was right. But, nevertheless, he could not help but sigh with regret.

At least his luck had been good, granting him several Ascended Memories. None seemed particularly useful, so he promptly fed them to Nightmare. That was already a good result for one day.

After a short pause, Sunny said:

"In any case… good job, everyone. That went much smoother than I thought it would. Especially you, Kai — that was an insane shot!"

Sunny knew a thing or two about archery. Shooting an arrow through a thin crack in the skull of a moving target, while flying at high speed… that was one for the books. The charming archer had been the one to destroy the skeletal trees, as well.

Kai smiled shyly.

"Thank you. Ah… to be honest, I can't quite believe it. I never thought that I would kill a Corrupted Tyrant one day."

His green eyes turned slightly wistful, as if he was recalling the past.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"...What on Earth are you talking about? Can't believe it? Says the guy who jumped into the mouth of a dragon to kill it!"

Kai coughed, while Jet glanced at him and raised an eyebrow.

"A dragon? What kind of a dragon are we talking about?"

The archer shook his head.

"It was just a transformed Saint. In the Nightmare."

This time, it was Soul Reaper's turn to blink.

"...Ascended Nightingale killed a Saint?"

Her voice sounded a little dull.

Effie suddenly laughed.

"What about it? I killed one, too. A huge pain of a bastard! And that one…"

She pointed at Sunny.

"...he actually killed the same Saint twice. Speak about holding grudges."

Jet rubbed the back of her neck with a neutral expression.

"Huh. And I thought my Second Nightmare was exciting…"

At that moment, Kai turned his head slightly, as if listening to something. He was most likely receiving a message through his comm.

And indeed, a few moments later, he called out to them:

"Everything is ready. We can depart in three minutes."

Sunny let out a relieved sigh. The two companies had been quick to organize themselves for a rapid march, and so, they would be able to leave before any of the migrating hordes arrived.

Kai looked at Sunny and Jet, then at Effie. Then, he asked hesitantly:

"Oh… are we going to take my ride, or yours?"

Effie scoffed.

"Does it matter?"

She grinned and answered her own question a moment later:

"Of course it matters! Do you think that I don't know how pampered you are by your soldiers? That guy… ah, it's really unfair! He has a fan club even in the army. They bring him all kinds of little gifts, including snacks. And sweets!

So… I think we need to celebrate, and I think you're treating."

Kai looked away in embarrassment.

"That… those aren't gifts! People are just concerned about their commander. I can't really refuse, either… they become sad if I do…"

Sunny grinned.

"Uh-huh. Whatever you say…"

The archer shook his head.

"Alright. Then we will ride in my APC. We can work on compiling a report for Army Command in the process, too..."

With nothing more to discuss, they hurried to leave the scene of the battle. Riding a personnel carrier at the head of a column of soldiers made Sunny remember the cold, dark days in the Antarctic Center… granted, Kai's APC was a little shabby when compared to the robust, beautiful Rhino.

Still, it got the job done, and the charming archer really had some

delicious stuff squirreled away in the nooks and crannies of the heavy machine.

The expedition force left the ravaged river shore behind and rushed across the plain, escaping the approaching mass of Nightmare Creatures. They masterfully navigated the landscape, avoiding the wandering swarms and keeping out of sight as well as they could.

The column had to fight off a few packs of abominations, but these skirmishes were too inconsequential to pay them any attention. Things like that were unavoidable when a large force traveled across Antarctica.

Everything was going well.

But, of course… it had not gone well for long.

At some point, the loud sound of an emergency message rolled through the interior of the APC.

Sunny looked up and turned to the communication terminal, frowning.

As soon as the damned thing lit up, he knew that something had gone really, really wrong.

Chapter-1093: Perfect Moment

The APC was a little cramped, but the four Masters were able to make themselves comfortable. They were sitting on empty ammunition crates, enjoying some of the snacks Kai had presented them with. The mood in the interior of the armored vehicle was surprisingly relaxed, and the Awakened crew under the archer's command were respectfully giving them some space.

Effie was talking:

"...wait, wait, wait. What? That is hilarious!"

The conversation had taken a random turn, leading to Kai sharing the details of how he and Sunny first met. At the time, one of them had been imprisoned in a deep well, while the other had gone more than a little feral after living alone in the Dark City.

The huntress knew what had happened in broad strokes, but this was her first time hearing the full story. She couldn't stop laughing.

"I can just imagine it…"

Effie wiped her eyes, then glanced at Jet and asked with curiosity:

"What about you, Colonel? How did you become Sunny's fairy godmother?"

Soul Reaper smiled, leaning back with a can of a refreshing beverage in her hand.

"...What's a fairy grandmother? Is it some kind of Nightmare Creature?"

Effie stared at her for a few moments, then shook her head despondently.

"What's a fairy go... damn. They really are two peas in the same pod…"

Jet chuckled.

"I guess not. Well, there's not much of a story. I've been assigned to hold vigil over an Aspirant, and that Aspirant turned out to be Sunny. It's rare for us kids from the outskirts to survive the First Nightmare, so I kept in touch."

Sunny let out a relieved sign when he realized that she wasn't going to describe the exact moment he had woken up… and what transpired right after. There was no need to give Effie more ammunition!

If Jet spilled the beans, he would never hear the end of it...

He opened his mouth to change the topic, but at that moment, the sound of an urgent message resounded in the interior of the APC.

Sunny did not like that sound at all.

Looking up at the communication terminal, he frowned. Almost at the same time, his own comm vibrated, receiving a message as well.

As Kai rose to access the terminal, the other three checked their comms. The messages Sunny and Jet had received were probably a little different, since the Special Reconnaissance Unit was privy to more information… but the gist of it was the same.

"Damnation."

Sunny glanced at his friends, reading the same somber tension on their faces.

The Chain of Nightmares… had just gone into another period of rapid escalation.

Dozens of Gates had opened across East Antarctica at the same time, and the initial readings showed that most, if not all of them, were of the Third Category.

Much worse, it had already been confirmed that several titans had emerged, ready to wreak havoc across the continent. Even though the three Saint had slayed several such creatures in the past months, the situation was still eerily similar to what had happened in the Antarctic Center.

Would the entirety of the Evacuation Army be able to handle the sudden crisis?

Sunny was not sure. Their chances were much higher than what the Antarctic Center contingent's had been, but still…

Things had just gone from bad to worse.

Jet sighed.

"More titans, huh… I wonder if any of them are Corrupted."

Effie continued to munch on her snack, seemingly unbothered by the dire news. She simply shrugged.

"We'll find out soon enough. There is no point in worrying about it now, is there?"

Soul Reaper grinned.

"True. Well… unless one of those titans happened to appear right between us and the siege capital."

The huntress suddenly stopped chewing, which was very abnormal behavior in her case, and glared at Jet silently.

"Colonel Jet… you just had to go and say it, didn't you?"

At that moment, Kai returned from the terminal with a troubled face. He looked at them for a few moments, then sighed.

"There has been a change of plans. The path we were supposed to take back is no longer available, so… Army Command sent orders to reroute the expedition force. We will be retreating to a different city, to be stationed there until further notice."

Effie sighed and shook her head despondently.

"See..."

Sunny and Jet glanced at each other. They had not received new orders, so the SRU still expected them to accompany the two companies.

That was a relief.

Kai turned to them and forced out a smile.

"Sunny, Ascended Jet… we will have to trouble you with helping us navigate the wilderness, as well as provide help to our scouts. I hope you don't mind. If everything goes well, we'll be behind walls in three days."

Sunny looked around.

"Why would we mind? This is like a luxury hotel… I haven't been fed this much delicious stuff in a while."

A small smile appeared on his face.

Kai nodded.

"Great! Then, please excuse me. I'll go arrange for the column to change course."

He went back to the communication terminal, leaving the three of them alone.

Sunny sighed, the smile disappearing from his face.

'This is it, then. A perfect moment…'

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Two days passed in a tense, but manageable atmosphere. The expedition force was persisting in its march, traversing the great plains of East Antarctica with acceptable speed. The skirmishes they fought increased in frequency and ferocity, but with Sunny's shadows

scouting out the way, they were able to escape major battles.

The rest of the continent was not doing as well. East Antarctica was in turmoil, with the assaults on the siege capitals growing more dreadful every day. The Evacuation Army was holding, for now, but the future seemed grim.

At the same time, the Saint had united to face the rampaging titans. Their battle had lasted for several ruinous hours, and ended in a bitter draw. Two of the titans perished, but the Transcendent had to retreat, each sustaining heavy wounds.

...Several more creatures remained, including one confirmed Corrupted Titan. For now, none of them was actively moving toward the siege capitals.

But it was only a matter of time.

'Bad… this smells really bad.'

Sunny was at the back of Kai's APC, sitting on a crate with his eyes closed. His shadows were out scouting, and Jet was sleeping on a neighboring crate, using a military coat as a blanket.

Suddenly, her communicator produced a melodic sound. Since it was not a notification from Army Command, Sunny paid it no attention. Soul Reaper, however, sat up, yawned, and glanced at the message with a sullen expression.

She remained silent for a few moments, then grimaced and showed him the screen of the communicator.

Sunny opened his eyes and read the title of a government propaganda article attached to the message. His eyes turned a little darker.

The title read:

"The Great Legacy Clans announce full support for the Southern Quadrant evacuation effort! In humanity's hour of need, its greatest warriors are rising against the forces of the Nightmare Spell. The best of Bastion and Ravenheart are already en route to reinforce the valiant soldiers of the Evacuation Army…"

Chapter-1094: Wake of Ruin

Sunny remained silent for a long time, then leaned back with a sigh. His thoughts were dark and heavy. Deep in his heart, an ember of anger smoldered, divorced from all reason, pushing him to do dangerous and short-decided things.

It was almost as if the Sin of Solace was whispering into his ears.

'Kill them all… how hard would it be to simply kill them all?'

Probably not much easier than slaying the Winter Beast, and with much more dire consequences.

Shaking his head, he looked at Jet. They had never spoken about it directly, but she definitely knew the real reason why the great clans were coming to Antarctica. After all, Soul Reaper had a much more extensive information network… she was deeply embedded into the hierarchy of the government, and had a personal connection to some of its leaders.

Of course, the government was only a second-rate player in the grand scheme of things. Still, they played an important role, and as such, had access to a lot of secrets.

He lingered for a few moments.

"...What do you think will happen now?"

Jet covered her mouth with a hand, yawned, and then smiled.

"Right now? Well… let me think. I guess the first thing that will happen is that I am going to receive a message from the old man."

Just as she finished the sentence, her communicator lit up, displaying a new notification. Soul Reaper chuckled quietly, then concentrated

on the screen of the military-issue device.

"See… it's a curse, to always be right. Give me a minute."

Sunny waited for her to finish reading the important message… and it was important indeed.

The old man Jet had mentioned was none other than Saint Cor, the Wake of Ruin, one of the two government Transcendents. Sunny had met him briefly after coming to East Antarctica, and the man definitely left an impression.

Wake of Ruin was a tall, gaunt man in his late fifties. Although his skin was showing signs of aging, his hair still remained perfectly black, like the feathers of a raven. The Saint had sharp features, a piercing gaze, and a stern demeanor, acting like a person who was used to both wielding power and bearing responsibility.

Wherever he went, a slightly sweet, sickening scent followed. Sunny was intimately familiar with that scent — it reminded him of the smell of the battlefield. Or rather, of what remained after the battle was over.

Saint Cor… was not a likable person. However, it was hard not to feel respect toward him.

The government Transcendent was not as renowned and awesome as the Saints of the Legacy clans — in fact, for a Saint, he was strangely low-key — but his age alone told volumes about what kind of man he was, and what ordeals he had lived through.

Wake of Ruin was not quite in the same league as the legendary figures like Immortal Flame and Nightwalker, since he had been a young child when the Spell first descended. However, he was still a member of the First Generation, and as such, had watched — and helped build — the world order of today.

Even if Saint Cor had become Transcendent later than the members of the Second Generation like Anvil and Ki Song, he was still, in a sense, their elder.

Sunny did not know what the arrangement between the government

and the great clans was exactly, but the mere fact that Wake of Ruin was allowed to be the exclusion from the rule and did not serve any of the Sovereigns hinted that there was more to the old man than appeared on the surface.

He was the field commander of the whole Antarctica operation.

…And Jet seemed to enjoy quite a close relationship with the veteran Saint. She was one of his most trusted agents. So, it wasn't a surprise that Soul Reaper would be one of the first people to be contacted by Wake of Ruin after the news of the Legacy forces coming to the Southern Quadrant were made public.

'Lucky me.'

Sunny did not have close ties to the upper echelons of the government, but as Soul Reaper's confidant, he would be privy to the vital information almost as soon as she.

Come to think of it, he also had eyes and ears inside Valor thanks to Nephis and Cassie… and enjoyed the friendship of one of the heirs of the House of Night. He even had a bond with Saint Bloodwave and was friendly with the White Feather clan.

'Huh. I guess I am better connected than I thought I was.'

And that was without even considering his venerated status in the Evacuation Army. Waiting for Jet to finish reading the message, Sunny grinned.

'Maybe I should seduce one of Seishan's sisters… just to complete the trifecta…'

Those women from the great clan Song — Ki Song's adopted daughters — were all a bit scary, though.

'Well, there's Mordret, as well…'

The naughty shadow gave him a sly glance, making Sunny blink a couple of times.

'What? What the hell are you on about?! I didn't mean it that way! I

was talking about befriending the bastard, not seducing him!'

The shadow tilted its head. If it had a face, there would have been an innocent smile on its lips, and sparks of dubious sincerity in its eyes. Sunny gritted his teeth.

'Damnation… I've only known you for a couple of days, but I am already starting to regret it. What is wrong with you, miscreant? Look at the other guys! None of them were ever problematic!'

To prove his point, Sunny gestured in the direction where the other shadows were, diligently scouting out the path for the column.

He could vivdly imagine their reactions, though...

The gloomy shadow would cross its arms, as if trying to say… "Who are you pointing at, you idiot?"

The happy shadow would nod energetically, expressing something like "Of course! We would never cause problems to our Master! Master, you're the best!" with all its being.

The creepy shadow would stare at him with its usual creepy inexpressiveness, but its thoughts would be easy to guess… it would probably be something like "I wonder what it would feel like to slice the new guy open. What do his insides look like? What is the texture? Hmm… do shadows have insides? I want to know..."

The haughty shadows would wear its usual arrogant look, radiating the "Keep me out of this plebeian conversation, peasant" feeling with its disdainful pose.

…The naughty shadow glanced at Sunny with amusement.

Sunny sighed.

'Alright. Point taken…'

Chapter-1095: High Praise

Eventually, Jet put away her communicator and stared into the distance for a few moments, thinking. Then, she turned to Sunny.

He asked:

"...So, what's the word?"

Soul Reaper had a contemplative look on her face.

"The good news is that we're getting reinforcements. Both Valor and Song are sending strong contingents. Two Saints each, a handful of Masters, and a supporting retinue of hundreds of Awakened. All of them the absolute elites of the Legacy clans, of course — some direct descendants, some loyal retainers. You can imagine how powerful of a force that is."

Sunny nodded. Despite his animosity toward the Great Clans, and those Legacies that served them, even he had to admit that these people had not ended up in the position of highest power by accident. Legacies were born and bred to be perfect warriors, and in that pursuit, they were ruthless both to their enemies and to themselves.

An Awakened from a Legacy clan was worth their weight in soul shards on the battlefield… it was only when compared to the survivors of the Forgotten Shore that they did not seem that exceptional. But the former Dreamers of the Dark City were an abnormality themselves. Hundreds of Legacy Awakened could achieve a lot in East Antarctica.

But whatever they could do paled in comparison to the arrival of four more Saints. That was the real game-changer, more than doubling the number of Transcendents present in the Southern Quadrant in one swoop.

With seven Saints leading the charge, the position of the Evacuation Army would be tremendously bolstered.

…That was if the newcomers had any intention of helping the evacuation effort along, and not just thwarting it.

He looked at Jet with a gloomy expression.

"What's the bad news, then?"

She shrugged.

"Well… you know. The great clans have their own plans. They are going to have to keep up appearances, at least, but who knows what they really have in mind?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, then nodded slowly.

"And what is the government going to do about it?"

Jet laughed.

"You really think they would send such information in a message? I mean… the military network is supposed to be protected, but come on."

He thought about it, then shook his head. Soul Reaper chuckled.

"In any case, we'll know more soon. I've been informed that the Legacy forces will be arriving in two batches. The second one is already sailing across the ocean, carrying most of them… two separate naval convoys, of course. Otherwise, gods know what would happen."

She lingered for a moment.

"The second, smaller batch will be arriving much earlier, though. They'll be here in no more than a couple of days, coming through the Dream Realm. The vanguard consists of two Saints and four Masters, from what I've been told. And… what a coincidence, they'll be coming directly to the siege capital we're heading for."

Sunny smiled slightly.

"Is it really a coincidence?"

Jet shook her head.

"Of course not. Cor is actually already there, assembling a welcoming party. He kindly requested for me to participate… oh, and he asked me to bring you along."

Sunny looked at her with surprise, a frown appearing on his face.

'What? Wake of Ruin singled me out directly?'

He raised an eyebrow.

"Me? Why does he want me, of all people, to be there? I don't even work for the government, really. There are certainly better candidates."

Soul Reaper smiled and shook her head.

"Because you're one of the deadliest Masters on the planet, Sunny. And, more importantly, you are not affiliated to any of the Legacy clans. At this point, Cor would have to be crazy not to try and use you as an asset."

Sunny felt pleased to receive her praise, but not at all happy with the contents of that praise. He leaned back and crossed his arms.

"And what if I don't want to be used?"

Jet laughed.

"Well… you can always go away and live as a hermit in the Dream Realm. Other than that, my advice is to get comfortable being used."

She thought for a bit, and then added:

"...But not too comfortable. Make sure to use the people using you in response, at least."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'What the hell kind of perverse wisdom is that?'

He scoffed.

"That's either a very profound or an entirely shameless statement."

Soul Reaper grinned.

"Ah, it's probably both. But, anyway, that's for the future… we have to get to the siege capital first. And with how things are going, that might be a bit of a problem."

Sunny grew serious. Jet was right… for the past two days, things went more or less well for the expedition force. But the last day was bound to be the most difficult, because they were leaving the wilderness and approaching the area surrounding a human settlement.

By nature of the Chain of Nightmares, these areas were the most dangerous on the continent. A constant stream of abominations was flowing toward the siege capitals to lay assault their walls, and the closer one got to a city, the higher the concentration of Nightmare Creatures was. Fighting a pitched battle was inevitable if the expedition force wanted to reach the gates of the human stronghold.

"Yeah. Let's make sure that everything goes smoothly first. We can worry about Legacies later."

The immediate task might now have been as grandiose, but it was a priority right now.

Jet had given up on sleep, and Sunny felt sufficiently rested. They left their corner of the APC and joined Kai on its roof. The archer was alone, quietly studying a bow made of dark, ashen wood. The weapon radiated an eerie aura of nebulous power, alienation, and lethality.

"What a dreadful thing…"

Sunny waved at him.

"New Memory?"

Kai looked away from the bow and forced out a smile.

"Yeah. I received it for slaying the Malignant Grave Root. It's a… a daunting bow to use, to be honest."

Sunny wanted to ask to take a look at the ashen bow, but at that moment, a loud roar resounded from somewhere up ahead, and Effie's voice came in through their comms:

"Ah, damn it… that swarm Sunny scouted an hour ago? They're coming sooner than we expected! Get ready!"

Sunny, Jet, and Kai glanced at each other, then sighed, summoning their best Memories.

The last day, indeed, was promising to be really troublesome.

Chapter-1096: Murder of Crows

They defeated the swarm. However, the smell of the blood attracted a migrating horde, so the expedition force had to fight their way through the flood of Nightmare Creatures, as well.

Eventually, the column broke free and escaped into the vast plain, but the peace was short-lived. Very soon, they had to fight another skirmish, which grew into another battle, which grew into an unending onslaught of enemies that threw themselves on the speeding vehicles without reprieve.

The mundane soldiers fought admirably. Although not as experienced as the veterans of the First Army, these men and women had also tasted their fair share of bloodshed and strife. Everyone was calm and collected, performing their duties with deadly efficiency and poise. Their performance was immaculate, and their morale seemed unshakable.

Was it because the Second Army had not lived through the same hopelessness as the soldiers in the Antarctic Center, or was it because Effie and Kai were able to inspire them better than Sunny had been able to inspire his soldiers? He was not sure. Regardless, the Wolves and the Nightsingers were a spirited bunch.

The Awakened were as resolute as the mundanes. Although fewer in number, the impact they had on the battlefield was immeasurably higher. All kinds of Aspects worked in harmony to create an impenetrable death zone around the column. The abominations that managed to survive it were promptly dispatched by the melee fighters.

…And, of course, the influence of the four Masters was even greater still.

Effie was serving as the vanguard of the expedition force, cutting a

bloody path for the vehicles to follow. Her lustrous figure weaved through the mass abominations, leaving devastation in its wake. The bodies of the creatures she killed were left crumbled and broken, as if an invisible colossus had crushed them under its feet as it walked across the vast plain.

The blows raining on her sculpted steel body, in turn, rang against metal without ever slowing her down.

Kai was soaring high in the sky, observing the rolling battlefield in its entirety and taking out the most dangerous creatures before they could approach the column. His arrows seemed to have a mind of their own, unfailingly slipping through the tiniest cracks in the armor of the abominations. Usually, one arrow was all it took to bring even the most fearsome creature down.

His secondary role was to protect the expedition force from the aerial attacks, and in that task, the archer performed admirably as well.

Jet was protecting the rear of the column, holding the pursuing enemies back. Her throwing stars fell like iron hail, seemingly numerous. Each carried the same dreadful Ability as her melee attacks, striking directly at the soul cores of the abominations.

Such a manner of fighting was bound to burn through essence with terrible speed, but that was what made Soul Reaper Jet so frightening of an opponent…

As long as she kept killing, her essence would never run out. And in such a furious battle, Jet was free to slaughter as many enemies as she could.

And finally, there was Sunny. He was sitting on the roof of an APC with his eyes closed, controlling numerous shadows. All across the column, inky-black hands made of darkness appeared out of nowhere to protect the soldiers and press Nightmare Creatures down into the ground, making them easy to slaughter. For now, there had not been a single casualty thanks to the watchful shadows.

Keeping the whole expedition force safe was not easy… in fact, the length of the column was well beyond the reach of his shadow sense,

and therefore, out of the area where he could use Shadow Manifestation. But Sunny was using a little trick… he had stationed his five shadows throughout the column, each serving as an island of his consciousness.

His senses, and his ability to control wild shadows, were extended manifold that way.

He could summon Saint to help out, too… but for now, Sunny was holding back from calling upon the taciturn knight.

The truth of the matter was that he wanted to keep her existence hidden. More or less everyone who had learned of their connection in the Antarctic Center were either dead now or could be trusted to keep the secret. Here in East Antarctica, he had mostly acted alone in the wilderness or side by side with Jet, so Saint had not been exposed.

The only exception was Song Seishan… but she had last seen the taciturn knight in the catacombs below the Dark City. Saint had changed a lot since then, both visually and in terms of Rank. Connecting her past and present self would be almost impossible.

As for the legend of Mongrel… no one knew who he was and where he had come from, in the first place. More than that, after the events of Falcon Scott, many people believed that Mongrel had fallen heroically while protecting the last siege capital.

From what Sunny had heard, there was already an epic propaganda film about the life and tragic sacrifice of the mysterious swordsman being cooked up back in the NQSC…

He shuddered at the thought.

In any case, Sunny was handling the battle fine, for now, and he wanted to keep Saint as his hidden ace for a while. That was why he had only summoned her within the sphere of darkness created by the Shadow Lantern during the battle against the Malignant Grave Root.

'Although… I'm not sure if I can keep this up much longer…'

As the siege capital drew nearer, the onslaught of the Nightmare

Creatures only grew more intense. Sunny was already struggling, and his reserves of essence were swiftly reducing.

Something had to change.

…And soon, it did.

He smelled it before he felt it. A sweet, sickening scent was suddenly carried over by the wind…

Then, the battlefield was suddenly shrouded in a vast shadow. Sunny opened his eyes and looked up, at the thing that had blotted out the sun.

Above them, a myriad of crows filled the sky. There were numerous thousands of them, all circling like a giant whirlwind of darkness. As he watched, the countless crows pivoted with eerie synchronicity, and dove down. Their black beaks and vicious talons emanated a sense of deadly sharpness.

The myriad of crows… was Wake of Ruin.

That was his Transformation. What came in the wake of a bloody battle?

A swarm of carrion birds.

The Saint had arrived to guide them into the city personally.

Chapter-1097: Special Envoys

Ever since coming to Antarctica, Sunny had been to so many underground strongholds and attended so many meetings in windowless rooms that all of them started to blend together. They all looked the same and felt the same. Even the people inside the rooms started to seem the same after a while.

This time, however, he found himself in a stately and luxurious hall, which was a nice change of pace. The interior was tasteful, but lavish. The tall windows let in natural sunlight. The filtered air was cool, crisp, and fresh. What was there not to like?

He was relaxing in a comfortable chair, idly waiting for Wake of Ruin to arrive. Jet was nearby, in a similarly laid-back pose. The Transcendent had summoned them immediately after the expedition force had reached the siege capital… and yet, he was running late.

Neither of them minded. They had barely had time to wash the dirt of the road off themselves before coming to the spacious hall. After weeks spent in the wilderness of East Antarctica, every moment of leisurely peace was like a precious gift.

Sunny was lazily thinking about the outcome of the latest battle. After the swarm of crows had descended on the Nightmare Creatures, hundreds of them were torn apart in an instant… and the slaughter did not stop until the column was safely behind the city walls. The sight of it was frightening and magnificent in equal measure.

'What a powerful Transformation…'

Of course, he wouldn't go so far as to say that Wake of Ruin's transcendent form was more powerful than that of, for example, Saint Tyris. Rather, they were best suited for different tasks. The government Saint excelled in battles against large numbers of Nightmare Creatures or potent adversaries that did not possess a lot

of physical defense.

He was also extremely hard to kill, since that would require exterminating every single one of the myriad of crows… although there would probably be some repercussions for Saint Cor if the swarm sustained heavy losses.

Sky Tide, on the other hand, could deliver a much more dire punishment to a single powerful enemy. Her ability to control wind and lightning also made her a more versatile and well-rounded Saint.

Sunny tried to imagine what would happen if the two Transcendents clashed. The mental image of a giant thunderbird being swarmed by a vast whirlwind of black crows in the dark skies was… truly an awesome one. Who would win? He was not sure. Saint Tyris would be at a slight disadvantage due to being robbed of one of her trump cards, true. She often relied on aerial superiority to slay her foes…

But then again, Saint Cormac had also been a flying beast. That had not prevented her from tearing off his wyvern head.

Jet glanced at Sunny and smiled.

"...You're thinking about murder again, aren't you?"

He turned his head and gave her an impassive look.

"Yes. Why?"

Soul Reaper laughed.

"No reason…"

Sunny studied her with a contemplative expression. Come to think of it, her crow Echo was a strange one. Was there, perhaps, a connection between it and the Saint of carrion birds?

He wanted to ask, but at that moment, the doors of the palatial hall opened, and Wake of Ruin himself walked in, looking as tall and gaunt as ever.

A subtle scent of rot and slaughter followed the old man like an

invisible mantle.

Saint Cor was wearing an austere military uniform that had an insignia of four stars emblazoned on its sleeve. His sharp, pale face was framed by unruly raven-black hair, and his dark eyes were staring at them with bleak dullness.

When he looked at Jet, however, a hint of cold fondness appeared in the weathered lines of his unfriendly face.

"Soul Reaper. Ascended Sunless. Welcome."

His voice was hoarse and a bit grating.

They had both stood up when the Saint walked in, so he gestured for them to sit. Then, Wake of Ruin took a chair opposite them.

"How did your last mission go?"

They glanced at each other. Jet was the one to respond:

"It was alright, sir. We scouted out a Corrupted Tyrant, met up with the Wolves and the Nightsinger, and helped them take the creature down. Casualties were minimal."

He nodded, seemingly indifferent to the news of a powerful creature being slain… which was only expected. As the field commander of the entire operation, Saint Cor must have been receiving reports like this quite frequently.

His next question, however, was a bit surprising.

"How do you like it in the SRU?"

Jet lingered for a moment.

"I like it just fine. Sir."

The old man shifted his gaze, subjecting Sunny to a piercing stare.

"What about you, young man?"

Sunny shifted uncomfortably, suspecting that there was a hidden

meaning to the question. He shrugged.

"I feel like it's a good fit for my abilities."

Wake of Ruin studied him for a few seconds, then nodded.

"Good. You've performed admirably as advanced scouts. However… it's a waste of your talents."

Both Sunny and Jet straightened, looking at the Saint with slightly startled expressions. Noticing their reaction, the old man remained impassive.

"Consider yourself reassigned effective immediately. The proper paperwork is already being delivered to the SRU headquarters."

'...What?'

Sunny stared.

Just like that, they got a new job? Without even being asked?

Jet cleared her throat. There were many questions burning in Sunny's mind, but she asked the most important one:

"Sorry, sir… but reassigned to where?"

Saint Cor stared at her for a moment, then pointed to himself.

"My personal retinue. That's officially… unofficially, however, you'll be acting as special envoys assigned to the Legacy forces. Each of you will be a contact person between the Evacuation Army and the Great Clans."

Sunny suddenly hated how opulent and lavish the spacious hall was. He frowned.

"With all due respect… sir… I get it why Ascended Jet might be considered a good candidate for such a position, but what do I have to do with any of it? Surely, you must know that my relationship with the Great Clans is a bit… rocky. That is not even mentioning whether I want the job or not."

He had spent six months hiding in the waking world to avoid the wrath of clan Valor, after all. Had the old Saint gone senile or what?

Wake of Ruin turned his heavy gaze back to Sunny and calmly raised an eyebrow.

"On the contrary, I think that you are the best person for the job, Ascended Sunless. You are quite close to one of the leaders of the Valor delegation, no?"

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"That depends on who that leader is, I guess."

Saint Cor smiled slightly.

…The smile made his gaunt, pale face look even more unnerving.

The old man glanced at an antiquated wristwatch adorning his hand and then said, his voice sounding cold and aloof:

"Why, it's young Lady Nephis of Valor, the Changing Star… of course."

He looked away from the watch and added matter-of-factly:

"She'll be arriving alongside Valor's other emissaries soon. Actually… I think they'll be there in a few minutes."

Sunny's eyes widened.

Chapter-1098: Appaling Curse

'I certainly knew that Neph was coming to Antarctica, but why is Wake of Ruin calling her one of the lea… huh? What? In a few minutes?!'

Sunny stared at the veteran Saint, dumbfounded. He had been anticipating meeting Neph again for a long time, but now that it was mere minutes away, his thoughts were in disarray.

'Did she check out my runes recently? Does she know that I'm a Tyrant now, too? Wait, no... why do I care if she knows or not? I shouldn't!'

Jet seemed a little surprised, too.

"Weren't they supposed to arrive in a couple of days?"

Saint Cor shrugged.

"They were. But with Tyris receiving some free time due to the three of us being beaten black and blue in the last battle, the schedule has been moved up. Ascended Sunless and you arrived just in time."

Sunny tried to digest the information. He knew that the Legacy reinforcements would be coming in two waves. The second one consisted of the bulk of their forces, traveling by sea, while the first one was supposed to be the vanguard and consisted of just a few people. They were going to travel to Antarctica through the Dream Realm.

The process was both simple and complicated. They needed a Saint who had already established a tether in the Southern Quadrant… in this case, Saint Tyris. The members of the vanguard had to either already be anchored in the same Citadel as she or be brought there by a different Transcendent.

Then, Sky Tide would be able to bring them with her to the waking world, thus transporting the necessary people to Antarctica.

The vanguard had to be small because Saints were limited in how many living creatures they could carry with them between the two worlds — just like Masters were limited in how much inanimate weight they could bring. Usually, a Saint could only transport one or two people at a time, and that consumed a fair amount of essence.

Coming to a sudden realization, Sunny looked around. He was starting to understand why such a lavish place was chosen for their impromptu meeting.

The opulence of the grand hall was not for the benefit of two Ascended… Wake of Ruin was rolling out the red carpet for the powerhouses of the great clans.

He looked at the old man, thinking. Saint Cor smiled.

"I'm starting to suspect that you are not of a very high opinion about the Great Legacy Clans, young man."

Sunny gritted his teeth, trying to hide contempt and anger from seeping into his gaze.

"That… is putting it lightly. Sir."

The old man studied him with a bit of curiosity.

"Why?"

Sunny gathered his thoughts, trying to come up with a convenient answer. Eventually, he said evenly:

"I guess it boils down to the fact that they are traitors."

Wake of Ruin raised an eyebrow.

"Traitors… interesting. How so?"

Sunny sighed.

"Awakened are supposed to be humanity's sword against the Spell, no? The Legacies are the greatest of the Awakened, and yet, they have seemingly given up on challenging the Spell. Much worse, they refused to come out of the sheath when we needed them. This whole disaster could have been salvaged if they had done their duty."

He had not mentioned the millions of people who had died in the Antarctic Center, and neither had he mentioned the tens of thousands of soldiers that perished with them. He doubted that such numbers could touch the heart of Saint Cor… the old man was one of the leaders of the government, after all. People like him viewed the world in terms of billions of lives, spread across many decades.

If Sunny told him that he was burning with anger toward the great clans because of the death of just three Awakened, the old man would have probably thought him crazy.

Wake of Ruin sighed.

"I see. Indeed, as long as you know anything about the world, it is easy to dislike the great clans. It is even easier to dislike them if you know a lot. But forgive me for sounding like a grumpy old man, Ascended Sunless… young people like you really lack perspective."

Sunny looked at him somberly.

"Do we?"

Saint Cor nodded.

"It's not your fault, of course. One hand to be there and live through the worst of it to understand. You see, Ascended Sunless — and you too, Jet — people of your age were born in a stable world. It might be a cruel world, and a harsh world. But it is a stable one, nevertheless. Because it has been built that way by your predecessors.

Many tend to look at the flaws of the world, but very few stop to question its foundations. And those foundations… why, they might have been better, but they could have also been so much worse."

He leaned back in his chair, looking into the distance with a neutral expression.

"The fact of the matter is that the Great Clans emerged from the chaos of the past... but they weren't the only ones fighting for power and dominance back then. There were other clans, other forces, and people with entirely different ideas about what the world should become. The things they did… ah.

It is a blessing, really, that those old monsters were buried in the past, and that the Great Clans ended up victorious. So… yes. You lack perspective."

Sunny frowned.

"Other forces? Different ideas? No offense, sir… but you have some nerve saying such things to two people who grew up in the outskirts. Others might now feel the same way, but we enjoyed the premium experience of living in this stable world you praise so much. I struggle to imagine what ideas could have been worse."

Saint Cor looked at him coldly, then suddenly laughed. His laughter sounded like the caws of a hungry raven.

"Ah. You are a direct person, Ascended Sunless. I like it."

He looked at Sunny with his dark, harsh eyes, the hint of mirth that had appeared in them for a moment dissipating without a trace. The gaunt old man shook his head.

"But you should make an effort to imagine it. A dying world ravaged by war. People who had all but forgotten how to be proper humans. And then, an even bigger disaster… but one that presented a great opportunity. An opportunity for some of them to become unimaginably powerful, unmistakably superior. Entirely unrestrained, and all but unstoppable, free to make whatever they wanted from this new era.

Freedom, young man… freedom can be the most appalling curse in the world, if it falls into the wrong hands. It is a terrifying thing."

Wake of Ruin grew silent for a few moments, and then smiled sarcastically.

"...Here I go rambling again. Jet, you should have stopped me. In any

case, our guests should be arriving any second now — the emissaries of Valor will come first, and the emissaries of Song will follow in a few hours. Help me welcome them, you two."

He paused, then looked at Sunny and added in a neutral tone:

"For better or worse, the Great Clans are all we have now. We'll need their help to see this operation through, so... keep that in mind, young man."

Sunny lingered for a bit, then reluctantly nodded. 'I can play nice... or at least pretend to play nice. We'll see how it goes.'

Chapter-1099: Vanguard

Before Sunny could answer, the atmosphere in the lavish hall seemed to change slightly. It was as though a wave of invisible energy rolled through it, making the air feel colder and sharper. Wake of Ruin sighed and turned around, looking at the empty space in the middle of the spacious chamber.

It had been empty before, but now, four people were standing on the lacquered floor, surrounded by the scent of the Dream Realm. For a moment, it felt as though they were simply a memory of a forgotten nightmare. But then, the feeling disappeared, and they were simply… there.

It was not often that Sunny saw Saints enter the waking world, and he had to admit that it was an eerie thing to witness. Were Awakened and mundane people as startled when he suddenly appeared out of thin air in front of them?

That idle thought streaked across his mind and disappeared without a trace when Sunny realized who exactly he was looking at. His eyes widened slightly.

Four people… and, by coincidence, he knew each of them.

The first one was Sky Tide. The Saint of the White Feather clan appeared as she always did — tall, slender, with a posture like that of an arrow. She wore a light armor of lustrous steel, and her hair fell like a cascade of pale gold. Tyris looked austere and beautiful, but also slightly inhuman because of her strange amber eyes and vertical pupils.

She stood apart from the other three, who all wore intricate suits of lusterless black armor.

The first of the three immediately attracted Sunny's gaze. His heart

moved slightly… Nephis looked different in the colors of house Valor. The black armor created a striking contrast against her ivory skin, silver hair, and cool grey eyes. She looked like a beautiful dark spirit that took the form of a deadly knight to sow the seeds of discord and ruin in the mortal world.

The second person was Morgan of Valor. Every time Sunny saw her, he was unnerved by how much she resembled her older brother… however, although Morgan and Mordret looked very much like reflections of each other, her demeanor was entirely different.

Morgan had black wavy hair and alabaster skin. Her suit of armor was adorned by a vermilion cape, which was the same vibrant color as her vivid scarlet eyes. Her entire being radiated the feeling of lethal sharpness, as if she was a living blade.

However… it was the third person that made Sunny's eyes widen in guarded shock.

He was a tall and severe man, with sharp facial features and even sharper eyes. His hair was black as Morgan's — in fact, there was a lot of familiar likeness between them — and touched by silver at the temples. His strong figure radiated an almost palpable feeling of authority and pressure, and his steely blue eyes were calm and piercing.

The armor he wore was simpler than that of the other two, as though the man did not need its protection.

A deep frown appeared on Sunny's face.

'Saint Madoc?! What the hell is he doing here?'

Indeed, the man was none other than Saint Madoc, the Whispering Blade… brother of Anvil and the nominal leader of the great clan Valor.

As Sunny watched, Sir Madoc turned his head and smiled calmly, somehow making his smile look both friendly and demanding submission.

"Wake of Ruin."

The gaunt old man was standing in front of Sunny and Jet, staring at the newcomers with a neutral expression. He lingered for a moment before saying in his hoarse voice:

"Whispering Blade. I have to admit… your appearance is a bit of a surprise."

Madoc's pleasant smile widened slightly.

"Isn't it only right for me to be here? My clan announced its full support for the brave men and women of the Evacuation Army. That, of course, includes my personal assistance."

Sunny tried to read the silent conversation that was happening between the two Transcendents. Surely, their words had other meanings… Saint Cor was probably trying to understand why the Sovereign had gone as far as to send his own brother to Antarctica. Madoc, in turn, was letting him know that Anvil was putting a lot of importance into what was about to happen in the Southern Quadrant.

Whispering Blade laughed slightly, then raised his hand.

"However, you shouldn't be addressing me. I'm just here to offer support and make sure that nothing untoward happens. The true leader of this expedition is my niece, Morgan. She will be in charge of everything."

She gestured toward Morgan, and then threw an even gaze at Nephis.

"And, of course, my other… niece… will be supporting her in this endeavor. I trust you know Changing Star. The three of us are the vanguard of the Valor force."

Wake of Ruin remained silent for a few moments, then nodded slowly toward Morgan.

"In that case, welcome to Antarctica, Lady Morgan. Lady Nephis."

He threw a heavy glance toward Whispering Blade, and then said evenly:

"How curious that there are two Saints in your group, as well as the

granddaughter of Immortal Flame… and yet all three of you seem to be subordinated to a young woman with no known achievements to her name. Some could see it as a sign that Valor is not taking this matter seriously…"

Morgan looked at the fearsome Transcendent, and then smiled. It seemed that his barely disguised provocation had no effect on her whatsoever.

Her voice was calm and indifferent:

"You are mistaken, Saint Cor. Clan Valor takes this matter extremely seriously. Which is why I have been entrusted with considerable power and authority."

Wake of Ruin sighed.

"Forgive this old man for being frank, Lady Morgan… but what kind of authority can a mere Ascended wield? I have half a dozen titans wandering the continent, and twenty-seven cities to protect. What can you actually do to alleviate my problems?"

Morgan shrugged silently, and then took a step back. Madoc, Tyris, and Nephis remained motionless as a whirlwind of sparks suddenly filled the spacious hall.

'What the…'

As Sunny watched, an Echo manifested from the hurricane of sparks… and then another, and then another. Three, six, twelve, fifteen… a few moments later, the large hall suddenly did not seem as large anymore.

Fifteen harrowing Nightmare Creatures filled it, each giving off a sense of vast and dreadful power.

Sunny stared, suddenly feeling cold.

'Transcendent… they are all Transcended Echoes.'

How many thousands of Corrupted Nightmare Creature had to be slaughtered to produce these Echoes?

The weakest of them was a Transcendent Demon, while the most powerful was a Transcendent Tyrant. And that was only what Morgan had chosen to show... who knew what she kept hidden?

The Princess of War smiled politely as she looked at Wake of Ruin.

"...These are my credentials. Are you satisfied, Transcendent Cor?

Chapter-1100: Accumulation

Fifteen Transcendent Echoes, most of them Devils…

Sunny simply stared, mentally recalculating the threat level of the Valor force… and of the great clans in general.

'I knew, of course, that the hidden power of the Sovereigns is vast. But it seems that I've been concentrating on their personal might too much… mostly because it is both mysterious and phenomenal. However, there is the mundane power of accumulation as well. I've been a fool to neglect it.'

To everyone else, a Corrupted abomination was a dreadful nightmare… even to Saints. Transcendents fought against the Corrupted and were more than capable of slaying them, but every such fight was a risk, especially against the creatures of higher Classes.

The Supremes, however, were equal to the Great Nightmare Creatures. Sunny had been under the impression that the Sovereigns mostly stayed within the confines of their Domains, but maybe he was not entirely right. Someone like Anvil or Ki Song could slaughter Corrupted abominations with the same ease he could butcher Awakened creatures.

It only made sense that they had accumulated a legion of powerful Echoes over the decades, including scores of Transcendent ones.

Sunny suddenly broke out in a cold sweat.

'...Hell. Who says that Transcendent Echoes are the limit?'

Since the Sovereigns could fight on equal footing with Great Nightmare Creatures… then didn't it mean that they could possess Supreme Echoes, as well?

To this day, Sunny had only seen two Great abominations. One was the unborn spawn of the Vile Thieving Bird, and the other — most likely — was the dark sea of the Forgotten Shore. What would it look like if a creature like that was turned into an Echo?

Was Morgan in possession of a Supreme Echo?

Did she have an Echo of a Titan slumbering in her Soul Sea?

He lingered for a moment, then glanced at Nephis, who stood in front of the army of monsters with an impassive expression on her calm, beautiful face.

'You want to destroy... this?'

He closed his eyes for a moment.

'...Damn that lunatic. She must have infected me with her madness! Because… I really want to make these bastards pay, too...'

At this point, it was hard to say whose madness was more virulent.

Sunny shook his head, then looked at Wake of Ruin, who was staring at Morgan with an unreadable expression. Eventually, the old man said in an even voice:

"Put those things away. They'll ruin the floors."

'What...'

Morgan tilted her head a little and silently dismissed the Echoes. Saint Cor nodded.

"Good. I see that your… clan… is as shrewd as ever. These Echoes will be of great help. If used correctly, of course."

Sunny was thinking feverishly.

"Saint Tyris is a vassal of Valor, but the reinforcements they sent are all direct members of the clan. Madoc, Morgan… Nephis… and one more Saint, who is escorting the main force across the ocean. With these fifteen Transcendent abominations, they alone could be

considered on par with the entire Evacuation Army, if not more powerful than us. And the forces of Song will be just as powerful."

There was already one Saint of the Song clan in East Antarctica — a vassal, just like Sky Tide. Two more were coming, both direct members of the clan, as well as several hundred Awakened and several powerful Masters. Who would these people be? What hidden aces would they bring along?

'Is that guy coming?'

Surely, he was. Mordret had joined Song to avenge himself on Valor, in the first place. He wouldn't miss a chance to make his former clan bleed.

The Prince of Nothing alone was more frightening than fifteen Transcendent Echoes.

Sunny almost groaned.

'These bastards are going to destroy the entire continent.'

Even though Antarctica was meant to be merely a prologue to the war of the Great Clans, that prologue was already promising to be the most chilling of disasters. It would be a cataclysm.

Everyone in the hall must have understood the magnitude of the approaching collision… however, no one seemed rattled by it. Wake of Ruin and Jet seemed a bit somber, but calm, too jaded to be shaken by the promise of appalling bloodshed. Saint Tyris was reserved and stoic. Madoc and Morgan… they hid it well, but Sunny could see bloodlust and readiness in their eyes.

As for Nephis, she appeared the calmest of them all. She might have fooled everyone else, but he knew what kind of hatred dwelled in her burning, murderous heart. The more the members of the Great Clans killed each other, the more exhilarated she would be.

As he thought about the grim prospects of the nearest future, Morgan looked around with curiosity.

Her voice had a hint of anticipation in it:

"I see that our colleagues from the great clan Song have not arrived yet?"

Wake of Ruin nodded.

"Indeed. They'll only be here in a few hours. Really, that makes things awkward for me… there is a lot we need to discuss regarding the current situation on the continent and your future role in keeping it in human hands. But what am I supposed to do? Repeat myself all over again when the Song vanguard arrives?"

He shook his head with resignation.

Sunny could just imagine that war meeting. Three sides discussing important matters of strategy, with everyone present perfectly aware of the fact that most of the gathered powerhouses were actually planning to kill each other, and with the few bystanders only wondering about how to make them kill each other in the most convenient way.

All the while pretending not to know anything, of course.

'What a joke…'

It was really funny. He barely held back laughter.

At that moment, Saint Cor suddenly threw a glance toward Jet and Sunny.

His grating voice resounded in the spacious hall:

"...So, make yourself comfortable for the moment. We'll convene when the other party arrives. These are two of my best people, by the way — Ascended Jet and Ascended Sunless. You all know Soul Reaper, so I won't say anything. Young Master Sunless, however, has only earned his reputation recently. The soldiers are calling him the Devil of Antarctica, from what I hear."

The veteran Saint chuckled.

"A fitting nickname if I ever heard one. In any case, these two will be my envoys for your two Great Clans. Timeliness has to be rewarded,

so… pick one. I'll send the other to accompany the Song people."

Both Sunny and Jet stared at him, not sure how to feel about being handled that way. It was as if they were livestock.

A precious livestock, but still…

'What a rude bastard.'

Sunny turned to look at the emissaries of Valor, frowning slightly.

Morgan glanced at him, then studied Jet for a while.

Eventually, she smiled.

"Why, we'll take Master Sunless. He's my dear sister's former companion, after all. I feel like we're good friends already!"

Chapter-1101: Strange Bedfellows

Soon after, Sunny found himself in a very strange situation.

He was left alone with three emissaries of the great clan Valor — Changing Star, Morgan, and Whispering Blade himself. Two of the most powerful people in the world were right there in front of him, speaking with each other casually.

And, of course, Nephis was there too.

The waiting room they had been led to was comfortable and spacious. Food and refreshments had been served by the staff members, and it seemed as if the four of them were having a friendly get-together back in NQSC.

The only difference was that everyone was wearing armor… well, except for Sunny himself. Still, he fit right in with the members of clan Valor due to his black tunic.

He sighed.

'Speak about strange bedfellows. That is what they call sleeping with the enemy, huh… wait. Neither of these sentences sound right!'

Lamenting the poor sense of whoever had come up with these idioms, Sunny reached for a plate and loaded it with all kinds of food. Supplies were a sore point for the Evacuation Army, but Wake of Ruin must have decided to go all out today — there were a lot of things on the table that would have been almost impossible to procure anywhere in Antarctica, except maybe on the black market.

The pile of food attracted the attention of Morgan, who observed him for a few moments, and then raised an eyebrow.

Her vermilion eyes had a hint of amusement in them.

"...Are you very hungry, Master Sunless?"

He glanced at her somberly, then shook his head.

"Well, if you must know… I spent the last couple of weeks in the wilderness, scouting out the migration routes of a horde of Nightmare Creatures. Then, I had to lend a hand in a battle against a Corrupted Tyrant, and came to meet you pretty much immediately after that. But… no. I'm not that hungry."

He leaned back and raised his heavy plate.

"However, one of the first things Antarctica teaches you is to eat when you can. Who knows when I'll have a chance to have a proper meal again?"

Whispering Blade chuckled.

"So… not too different from subjugating the Dream Realm, then. Morgan is a bit too young to remember, but back when human territory was actively expanding, it wasn't rare for Awakened to spend years in hellish conquests of untamed regions. Good food was more precious than soul shards."

The Saint looked at his niece with an outwardly benevolent expression and smiled.

Morgan grimaced, then sighed.

"What a frustrating day. Everyone seems inclined to point out how young and inexperienced I am."

Sunny made himself busy chewing. At the same time, he sent Nephis a mental question through the Blessing of Dusk.

[What's up with them?]

She showed no sign of having heard him, playing her part perfectly. However, a moment later, he received a response:

[Don't mind their games. They're just playing… it only helps Morgan to be seen as an inexperienced beneficiary of nepotism, and for Madoc to be seen as an envious man who is full of bitter resentment toward his younger brother. In truth, she is probably the more formidable of the two, and Valor's unity is like a monolith.]

Sunny poured himself a cup of strong coffee.

[More formidable of the two? Really?]

Nephis was looking in the window.

[Not in terms of combat power. But she is young… once Morgan becomes a Saint, Madoc — or any other Saint, perhaps — won't stand a chance against her.]

'That... makes me feel a bit better, actually. So I'm not too much of a loser for being crushed by her in less than forty seconds.'

Their short duel in the Dreamscape was still fresh in his memory.

The exchange of thoughts qwith Nephis only took a couple seconds. It was just enough time for Morgan to turn to her and ask:

"What about you, sister? Do you perhaps consider me unworthy of leading this expedition, as well? Well, it's true that I'm not quite as distinguished of a leader as my dear sister. Do you think you should have been in charge instead?"

As Sunny shifted uncomfortably, Neph looked at Morgan, calmly held her gaze for a couple of moments, and then said in an even tone:

"...If I wanted to be in charge, I would have been."

The heiress of Valor fell silent, then suddenly laughed.

"Ah… that is why I like you, Changing Star! Am I not blessed to suddenly get such a wonderful little sister?"

Although she was smiling, her eyes remained sharp as a cold blade.

Morgan looked away from Nephis and turned her attention to Sunny.

"I hear that a lot has happened to you after we last met, Master Sunless. The Devil of Antarctica… it has a nice ring to it. Who would have thought that such a pleasant young man would earn such a fearsome reputation? It does make me regret the fact that you had turned down the invitation to enter clan Valor, though."

Sunny glanced at her over his plate and smiled.

"I am not going to lie… I did regret that decision myself, a couple of times."

Then, he shrugged and turned his attention back to the food.

"However, what's done is done. And hey, that's fate for you. Despite everything, we are still going to end up fighting side by side."

'And maybe even against each other. When that happens, your regret will only grow.'

Morgan nodded.

When she spoke, her voice sounded a little cold:

"Indeed. Life is truly unpredictable… the first time we met, it was because you had caused a certain person to escape his prison, and played a role in the death of one of Valor's Saints. And now, we might be seeing that person very soon, and you are enjoying a meal with me. What a funny turn of events."

Sunny looked at her for a few moments, then shook his head.

"You're right, it's kind of funny. However, you are wrong if you think that we'll see that guy. Knowing him, you won't see him coming up until the moment he plunges a knife in your back."

Whispering Blade's face slowly grew dark. Looking at Sunny, he said in a neutral tone:

"From your words, it's hard to understand whether you despise that abomination or admire him, Ascended Sunless."

Sunny laughed.

"No matter how I feel about that guy… the point is, I would prefer to do it from a distance."

Saint Madoc studied him for a moment, then nodded.

"Wise."

Hearing that, Morgan chuckled.

"Indeed. Then, Master Sunless… let's wait and see how good your luck is…"

Chapter-1102: Opposing Forces

After that, all casualness drained from Morgan's voice. When she looked at Nephis, her face was just like it had been the moment she tore Sunny's heart apart in the Dreamscape — cold and sharp, emanating a sense of lethal danger without her even trying to.

"How much does he know?"

Hearing that question, Neph shrugged slightly. Her answer was simple:

"Enough."

Morgan sighed, then smiled from the corner of her mouth.

"I see. That makes it easier. I'll speak comfortably, then."

Sunny studied the two of them for a few moments, then asked with a bit of curiosity in his voice:

"Really? Aren't you concerned that I'll report everything you say to Saint Cor?"

Whispering Blade chuckled. He was mostly keeping silent before, but it was impossible to mistake him for a passive observer. Just by sitting there, the elder of clan Valor radiated a sense of overwhelming, domineering power.

It was as though he owned this room… or every room he found himself in, rather.

Saint Madoc glanced at Sunny with indifference.

"So what if you do?"

And that was it. That was all he had to say to make Sunny

understand that Whispering Blade did not care if Wake of Ruin knew all about their conversations… not because there was nothing to hide, but simply because the government was not anywhere near being in a position to act on such information.

It was irrelevant.

Sunny suddenly felt a compulsion to cut the indifference off the Saint's face with the blade of the Sin of Solace.

…However, he did not let any of it show on his face. Instead, Sunny smiled pleasantly and nodded.

"Makes sense. Sorry… it was a stupid question."

Morgan leaned back, considering something.

Eventually, she said:

"Whether that person comes or not is unclear. However, the rest of the force the Queen of Worms has sent is all but confirmed by now. It's good to know who we are dealing with… but there were some last minute changes. We must be ready to adjust our strategy accordingly."

'The Queen of Worms?'

Sunny wondered if that was Ki Song's True Name, her title… or simply a derisive nickname Valor had given her.

Morgan and Whispering Blade were seemingly ignoring his presence, speaking mostly for Neph's benefit. They were both looking at her, at least.

Saint Madoc's voice was a bit listless:

"One of her vassal Saints, Dire Fang, has been here in the Southern Quadrant for a while now. He is a ferocious fighter, but we don't need to be too concerned about him. Sky Tide alone will be enough to keep the brute in check."

He lingered for a moment, then added:

"But the other two are Ki Song's daughters. They are worthy of our concern. We already knew that Silent Stalker is escorting their Awakened across the ocean. She… is a dangerous one. Stalker is a huntress, so she is both strong and cunning. Dealing with her will be hard, but we can manage that, as well."

Whispering Blade looked at Nephis and Morgan heavily.

"However, it is the third one that we must be wary of. Beastmaster. That demoness is the true horror… in terms of personal power, I alone am her equal. Even then, that depends on the battlefield. Here in Antarctica, she will have a tremendous advantage."

Sunny, who had been keeping his mouth shut, finally couldn't help himself and asked:

"How so?"

Saint Madoc spared him a glance. For whatever reason, he even decided to answer.

"Both Silent Stalker and Beastmaster are Song's adopted daughters… however, not all of them are the same. Stalker is deadly, but Beastmaster is more than that. She is one of the most feared Saints in the world. That is because she is an… enchantress, of sorts. Beastmaster can enthrall people. Much worse, she can also enthrall beasts… and even Nightmare Creatures.

I hope I don't have to explain how such a power can be advantageous here in Antarctica."

Sunny grew quiet.

That was right… Madoc didn't have to explain. With myriads of abominations flooding the continent, a Saint with the power to subjugate them would be a nightmare to fight against.

Who needs Transcendent Echoes when you can have Corrupted creatures serving you?

Still… there had to be a limit to Beastmaster's power. No one was invulnerable.

Suddenly, Nephis sent him a mental message.

[What do you think?]

Sunny sighed.

He knew a bit about Dire Fang, the vassal Saint of Song who had been sent to the Southern Quadrant at the start of the campaign. He was a savage and tremendously lethal fighter, and also an aloof and reticent loner. In terms of power, Sunny would have put him above Cormac, but below Tyris.

So, then, the opposing forces were like this:

On one side, there were Dire Fang and two adopted daughters of Ki Song, Silent Stalker and Beastmaster. There was also Mordret, most likely.

On the other side, there were Saint Tyris, Whispering Blade, and one more Transcendent of clan Valor. Since Madoc did not mention the latecomer, that person must not have been on the same level as him, perhaps comparable to Silent Stalker. There were also Morgan and Nephis.

…And Cassie. People who underestimated the unassuming blind girl were doomed to end up in early graves.

He lingered for a moment, then responded:

[It seems like the odds are stacked slightly in Valor's favor.]

Nephis looked at him calmly.

[I agree. And that is precisely why we should feel nervous.]

Sunny blinked.

'...Us? Since when do I care about what Song has in store for Valor?'

Granted… he was a special envoy now. He would be accompanying the forces of Valor across East Antarctica, and maybe even beyond. That put him in a wonderful position to keep an eye on the actions of

the great clan. But it also meant that should Song stage a sudden attack on their enemy, he would be directly in the way.

'But what exactly are they hiding in their sleeve?'

At that moment, Morgan suddenly looked at him and said, her voice tinged with a bit of curiosity.

"Oh, there's also going to be a third daughter. An Ascended… Song Seishan. Little is known about her, considering that she had spent close to a decade lost in the Dream Realm. The two of you would know her better than me, since she also comes from the Forgotten Shore. So… what is she like?"

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other, feeling unease.

After a few moments of silence, he answered:

"...Trouble. If I had to describe her with one word, it would be that — she's trouble."

Chapter-1103: Beautiful Monsters

Before too long, it was time to meet the emissaries of Song. Sunny found himself feeling a bit curious… after all, he was not too familiar with the great clan that ruled the northwest reaches of the human territories in the Dream Realm.

By all accounts, the Song clan was no less storied and powerful than Valor. Its foundation had not been as great, but after Ki Song rose to prominence and became one of the first humans to Transcend, the power of her clan utterly eclipsed that of the older, better established Legacy families.

As far as Sunny could remember knowing anything, clan Song was one of the three most exalted powers in the world. Their influence spread far and wide, and their home in the Dream Realm, Ravenheart — an ancient palace built between the snowy peaks and smoldering volcanos of an impregnable mountain chain — was universally considered one of the Great Citadels of humanity.

With a population rivaling that of Bastion, Ravenheart was a beautiful and severe place… from what Sunny knew. Strangely enough, it was not nearly as popular and well-known as the colossal castle that clan Valor ruled. In fact, the whole great clan Song was a little mysterious.

The image of Bastion was etched into the minds of all humans by countless dramas and films, with countless stories of romance and valor taking place in its stone walls. The land of snow and ash where clan Song ruled, however, was rarely depicted, and when it was, it was always to show something distant and exotic.

Whether it was because Ki Song did not care about mundane fame, or because Anvil put more effort into building the public image of his

clan, Sunny did not know.

He did, however, know that through pure coincidence, his own path had also mostly crossed with the representatives of clan Valor. Valor were the ones in control of the northernmost territory carved out by humanity in the Dream Realm, where it brushed against the Hollow Mountains, and so, that was where he had gone after becoming an Awakened.

From the Sanctuary of Noctis to the Night Temple, Sunny had met many servants of Anvil of Valor… killing some of them… and then had the misfortune of meeting the Sovereign's son in the flesh. With the complications that followed, it was fair to say that he knew Valor pretty well.

The same could not be said about Song, though… all his experience with that Domain was limited to having met Seishan in the Dark City. Even then, Sunny was not at all close with the former leader of the Handmaidens, so it was not like she had shared stories of her clan with him.

So… naturally, Sunny was curious.

His curiosity was mixed with a bit of dread, though.

They entered the spacious reception hall once again. This time, it was Wake of Ruin who had been waiting there for some time, speaking quietly with Jet. The staff member who had escorted Sunny and the emissaries of Valor tactfully disappeared, and the gaunt Saint greeted them with a curt nod.

"You're here. I hope you rested well… there is a lot to discuss, so we probably won't be sleeping tonight."

Whispering Blade smiled coldly.

"...Wouldn't dream of it."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, startled.

'Was that… a pun? By the dead gods, I hope it wasn't.'

The conversation died before receiving the chance to start, because right at that moment, something imperceptible seemed to change in the world. A cold breeze blew through the hall, and then, four people were standing in the middle of it, just like the four emissaries of Valor had a few hours ago.

Sunny involuntarily held his breath.

He had seen Dire Fang from afar once, some time ago. The grim man had not changed much, except for the fact that there were ugly bruises and half-healed lacerations on his body this time. He was of medium height, with an angular face and powerful muscles rippling under his dusky skin.

The Transcendent wore a sleeveless vest that left his broad shoulders and powerful arms exposed. His hair was dark and disheveled, like the fur of a wild beast. A thick beard covered the lower part of his gloomy face, and his eyes were harsh and piercing.

Saint Dire Fang emanated a feeling of wildness, savage power, and ferocity… as if the world turned a little more primal wherever he appeared.

'Dangerous.'

Sunny studied the man for a moment, then turned his attention to the next newcomer.

His heart trembled.

The woman standing next to Dire Fang was not outwardly seductive, but for whatever reason, she seemed almost irresistibly alluring. Where Whispering Blade was dignified and domineering, she was breathtaking and tantalizing. She was tall, with fair skin and red, sensual lips. Her cold beauty was only made more striking by her inviting dark eyes, which were full of strength and willpower.

Beastmaster had long hair that fell like a waterfall of black silk, and wore a simple dress of carmine fabric, which nevertheless looked regal and mesmerizing on her slender figure. Her face was a little aloof, and a little humorous. It was a kind of face one never wanted

to look away from.

…Sunny felt a pang of fear when he saw her. Now, he understood why Madoc had called her a demoness. The daughter of Ki Song did, indeed, resemble a beautiful demon. Even if he had not known that she was one of the most terrifying Saints in existence, he would have felt it… simply from the fact that he immediately wanted to discard that knowledge and step closer to her.

'Snap out of it.'

Maybe Sunny would have fallen for Beastmaster's enchanting beauty if he was young and inexperienced, but after meeting beings like Solvane and Hope, he was somewhat immune to such charms.

He shifted his gaze to Song Seishan… also known as Blood Lord… to distract himself from the enticing visage of Beastmaster.

'...Bad idea!'

Now that she had become a Master, Seishan's exotic beauty was even more striking. Hers was a different kind of beauty, though… it was poised, reserved, graceful, and exquisite. Seishan was one of the Awakened whose appearance had been changed by their Aspect — her skin was of a strange grey color, which made her look both inhuman and riveting.

However, Sunny could not forget her other, monstrous face… he had seen her transform into a hideous creature during the siege of the Crimson Spire, after all. And even before that, he had seen what her victims looked like after being drained of blood.

He sighed mentally.

'Monsters… beautiful monsters. Are all of Ki Song's adopted daughters like that? What the hell has she done to them?'

And speaking of monsters…

Finally, he looked at the fourth member of Song's vanguard. It was a middle-aged man in heavy armor, his face bleak and unfamiliar. His eyes, however…

Were perfectly human, with not even a hint of a mad prince hiding in their depths.

Sunny frowned.

'Yeah… I am not fooled. There's no chance that Mordret would miss on an opportunity to come and wage war against Valor. It's you, isn't it, bastard?'

He lingered for a few moments, and then addressed the bleak man:

"...Long time no see."

The bleak man looked back at him, a masterfully crafted expression of confusion appearing on his face. His lips parted in a polite smile.

"I am sorry. I don't think we've met."

The smile almost looked mocking.

Sunny shook his head, then looked away.

"Uh-huh."

Wake of Ruin frowned slightly. His grating voice sounded a little irritated:

"Now that everyone is here… let's skip the introductions. I extend my gratitude to the elders of the great clan Valor and the great clan Song, for coming to our aid in the time of need. Come, let's start… we need to discuss the war…"

Chapter-1104: Devil's Advocate

Sunny had been relying on Army Command to keep him alive for about half a year now, but weirdly enough, he had never been to the actual headquarters of the Evacuation Army.

To be fair, Army Command had no definite location. It was spread across many siege capitals, strongholds, and even continents, all of them connected into a seamless network both by technology and Aspect Abilities of the Awakened officers. Most of the staff was here in Antarctica — like the members of the department where Kim was currently working — but not all of them.

That said, the underground fortress below the building where the reception hall was located seemed like the closest thing to the heart of Army Command. It was a hive of activity, with countless people — both mundane and Awakened — hurrying feverishly to accomplish a myriad of tasks in a timely manner.

Their work might not have seemed as dire as what the soldiers on the frontlines were going through, but it was nevertheless just as vital. Without efficient and timely support and management, the evacuation campaign would be doomed to end in a bloody disaster.

From updating the status of various areas in relation to the strength of the Call in them to compiling data about countless Nightmare Creatures and guiding troop movements, Army Command was the brain of the army. Without the brain, the body would be utterly useless.

…Somewhere in here, there was also an office where the allocation of contribution points was decided. In any other circumstances, Sunny would have felt his heart start to beat faster, but right now, he was fully concentrating on something else.

His eyes were glued to the bleak man, who was walking behind

Beastmaster and Seishan while acting perfectly unassuming. Or at least as unassuming as a Master could be.

Army Command was, indeed, absolutely vital to the war effort. It was also a treasure trove of access and information.

It would certainly be a shame if a particular psychopath got loose in its very heart.

'But what can I do?'

Sunny might have known who Mordret was and what he was capable of, but as far as stopping the Prince of Nothing went… there was little to be done.

Which was both unnerving and incredibly frustrating.

Luckily, Sunny was not alone in his frustration. Morgan and Madoc also threw somber glances at the unassuming Master from time to time, their eyes cold and sharp. Sky Tide had a complicated expression on her usually stoic face, as well.

Only Nephis seemed unconcerned… and why would she be? Of the five of them, she was the only one who had never met the Prince of Nothing.

She would learn to be wary of him soon, though.

'...Probably.'

In truth, their goals were closely aligned. There was no telling what Changing Star would do if she met Mordret face to face.

Actually, the same went for Sunny. Despite his wariness and hostility, the Prince of Nothing was not necessarily his enemy. It was just that Sunny knew how inhumanly ruthless and blood-chillingly cruel Mordret could be, if it suited his goals.

And how cunning he was.

That was why Sunny could not remain calm at the prospect of someone like that going on a rampage across Antarctica.

Would Mordret care how many innocent people burned in the flames of his retribution?

Most definitely not.

'...But what can I do?'

The same question returned, gnawing at Sunny. There were many things he could do, actually… just not any that would not end in him being killed at the spot by Wake or Ruin or Beastmaster. He could prematurely start a direct clash between Song and Valor right here in the army headquarters, even…

'First of all, calm down. You don't even know if that is really Mordret. The guy might really be a random Master the emissaries of Song chose to bring along for whatever reason.'

Sunny could see the soul cores of humans and Nightmare Creatures, but that ability was useless against the Prince of Nothing. When Mordret possessed a body, he also possessed the soul, or at least enough of it to mimic how it was supposed to look like.

'Right. I shouldn't rush to conclusions. Wait for now, observe, act later.'

Saint Cor led them to a large chamber that was filled with all kinds of equipment to display information, much of it being updated in real time. Sunny looked curiously at a large projected map of East Antarctica, with countless symbols denoting masses of Nightmare Creatures moving across it in a seemingly chaotic manner.

There were also numerous static marks showcasing the location of Nightmare Gates. He paled slightly, suddenly faced with a stark reminder of how many of them there were.

The marks littered the entire map like pustules, as if the continent was being slowly devoured from the inside by a lethal disease. There were a staggering amount of them in the wilderness, but the concentration grew exponentially in the vicinity of the siege capitals.

The moving symbols were all congregating toward the human settlements, too. The paths of the hordes of Nightmare Creatures

might have seemed aimless at first, but if one looked at the bigger picture, it was painfully clear that all of them were slowly drawing closer to the twenty-seven cities.

It looked like an inescapable avalanche of death and despair. A nightmarish chain of doom and destruction that was tied around Antarctica's neck, its cold embrace becoming tighter with each day.

That was what the Evacuation Army was facing.

Feeling a chill creep up his spine, Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then glanced at the people walking in front of him. His eyes grew darker, and the shadows nestling in the corners of the strategy room grew deeper, too.

'...Unforgivable.'

His hands would have turned into fists if he had not made a conscious effort to appear calm.

His heart, however, was dark and heavy.

'Unforgivable.'

Even knowing what was happening in Antarctica, these mighty people had come here to make it all worse. Sunny thought back to what Wake of Ruin had said about the comparative benevolence of the Great Clans, trying to remember the crumbs of sense he had found in those words.

But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't.

…In a sense, it was no different from the outskirts. The whole world was like that. No one cared if you lived or died in the outskirts, and the people who had the power to help you all chose to do nothing, or at least as little as possible.

In the same way, the people who held the true power were comfortable doing nothing to save the population of Antarctica. The Chain of Nightmares had happened in the Southern Quadrant, but the next time, it might happen somewhere else. Then, too, they would remain indifferent.

To those who lived in the outskirts, citizens seemed like people who inhabited a distant paradise. But to the great clans, the citizens were no different from the outskirt rats.

Of course, one could object and argue for the other side. The government was not malicious at its core, and its treatment of the people in the outskirts was born out of necessity. The outskirts existed because the planet could not sustain the whole human population… someone had to be sacrificed to make sure that the rest survived. Otherwise, there would not be enough resources to save anyone.

And it wasn't like the unfortunate souls in the outskirts were completely abandoned… there was a constant supply of cheap synthpaste, there were jobs, there was electricity, access to entertainment, and so much more. People were not being left to die… they at least had the means to survive, if only barely. It was just that their lives were more or less doomed to be short and bitterly hard.

In the same way, the great clans were not entirely heartless. It was just that their plans for humanity were aimed at the Dream Realm, and not the waking world. Even then, they made a little bit of effort.

They had sent Sky Tide and Dire Fang… the House of Night might not have taken part in the ground operation, but they did supply enough Saints and Nightwalkers to guide the naval convoys to and from Antarctica.

But still… Sunny could not forgive them. He didn't want to. All of it was a load of crap, as far as he was concerned.

He might have found a way to excuse the great clans if remaining passive was all that they had done, but they did not stop at that.

Not only had Valor and Song abandoned Antarctica to the Chain of Nightmares, they even planned to use it as a private battlefield and fight each other while countless people suffered and died around them.

That, he could not forgive.

…Sunny glanced at the back of the bleak man and smiled slightly.

'You want to slaughter the entire clan Valor? Wonderful. Slaughter them well.'

Then, he looked at Nephis.

'You want to destroy all of them? Even better. I'll cheer you on.'

Sunny was not a forgiving man. In fact, he was quite spiteful.

'Let's see how their little war goes…'

Chapter-1105: Step by Step

The strategy meeting dragged on. The emissaries of the great clans seemed to be well aware of the situation on the infected continent — in fact, they seemed to have a clearer picture of what was going on than even Sunny did — but their understanding of the nuances of the Antarctica campaign was purely theoretical in nature.

Only Sky Tide and Dire Fang possessed practical knowledge of what it meant to fight against the land that was slowly being devoured by a tide of nightmares. The others were going to have to catch up, fast.

Still, they were not inexperienced people. Whispering Blade especially was a veteran of many wars — he had led the Knights of Valor into plenty of untamed regions of the Dream Realm, spending years in lengthy and harrowing campaigns of subjugation to expand the borders of human territory in that inhospitable world.

From that perspective, it was easy to understand why Anvil had chosen his brother to helm the conquest of the Tomb of Ariel.

Beastmaster was at least a decade younger than Saint Madoc, but she seemed no less of a seasoned tactician. Her exalted reputation had not appeared out of nowhere, after all. The lands controlled by the Song clan might not have expanded as dramatically as those ruled by Valor in the past two decades, but every region they did conquer had been a much more dire hell to surmount.

The tantalizing Saint was surprisingly soft-spoken and cordial. Sunny had expected her to be arrogant, aloof, and unapproachable, but she was actually quite easygoing. Her husky voice was pleasant on the ear, and her red lips were quick to twist into a small, but bright smile.

That smile was absolutely beguiling.

Seishan was actually not that much younger than Beastmaster. Even though she was not a Saint, she had spent more time braving the horrors of the Dream Realm than most Transcendents — a decade of surviving on the Forgotten Shore made her more than qualified to participate in this meeting.

The same went for Nephis. She might not have remained there as long, but her singular achievement of surviving close to two years of solitude in one of the most dire regions of the Dream Realm, eventually escaping it through a Nightmare Seed, earned her some respect from everyone present in the strategy room.

As for Morgan… no one except for Madoc knew much about her achievements and experiences, but they also did not really doubt her competence. Her mind was as sharp as her eyes, and her knowledge of warfare and strategy seemed almost supernatural.

The blood of War God flowed through her veins, after all. Sunny wouldn't be surprised if the Princess of Valor ended up being the most talented strategist among them.

So, each of them was more than capable of absorbing the new information about the perils and nuances of the Chain of Nightmares at a staggering speed.

…Except for the unassuming bleak man, who had been introduced as Ascended Bast. Even his name was dull and unmemorable.

From what had been told about him, Ascended Bast was simply a retainer of the great clan Song. He was a part of their advance party because of a rare and useful Utility Aspect.

No one bought that explanation, though.

Sunny and Jet had been relegated to the role of silent observers, but even they spoke up from time to time, answering questions or sharing their personal experiences of fighting on the frontline. Bast, however, had not said a single word from the start of the meeting, remaining placidly in a corner and watching the proceedings with relaxed, aloof calmness.

'...Like a cat playing with a mouse.'

Sunny had never seen a cat, but he had met a few rats in the outskirts. As far as vermin went, rats were pretty scary… so a creature that made a hobby out of hunting and torturing them must have been really terrifying.

Still, there was a limit to how much he could stare at the bleak Master.

The discussion Wake of Ruin was having with the emissaries of the great clans was not that interesting, either. Sure, many important things were being talked about, but Sunny knew most of them. The rest, he could absorb by allocating a small part of his mind to the task, which was only made easier by the [Blessing of Mind].

Eventually, his eyes settled on Nephis.

Sunny lingered for a while, then asked her through the mental link:

[What are you planning to do?]

He knew what the great clans wanted. He knew what the government wanted. He definitely knew what the Nightmare Creatures wanted, and he even somewhat knew what he himself wanted.

Changing Star, however, was a mystery. Her endgame was absolutely clear, but here and now? Sunny was not sure what Nephis wanted to get out of Antarctica.

She glanced at him briefly, then seemingly turned her attention back to the discussion of which force would be responsible for which area of East Antarctica.

Her response came a few moments later, and was very simple:

[...Survive.]

Sunny tilted his head a little.

[Quite a sober answer, coming from you. Where is the real Nephis and what have you done to her?]

The corner of her mouth twitched upward. That small change was so subtle that he doubted anyone except for him noticed it.

Neph lingered for a while. Eventually, she spoke — or rather, thought — in her usual even tone:

[Sunny… don't you think that life is pretty strange?]

Sunny blinked.

'What has gotten into her?'

He wasn't used to hearing such questions from Nephis.

[Yeah, sure. Why?]

She maintained her poised appearance, pretending to pay attention to the conversation about the disposition of clan forces, as she answered:

[You've been through a lot in these past six months. The time before that must seem like a lifetime ago, for you. But for me… when I wake up, I still think that I am in the Nightmare, sometimes. For me, it feels like I was lost in the Dream Realm just yesterday.]

Changing Star paused, then continued after a few short moments:

[But I am not. I am a member of clan Valor now, I have a Citadel of my own, and dozens of Awakened are ready to follow my orders. That… was yesterday. Today, I am in the Southern Quadrant, preparing to wage war both on countless Nightmare Creatures and on the best of clan Song. Beastmaster is here, smiling at me politely. Whispering Blade is also here, watching my every move.

All of it… it a bit overwhelming.]

She turned her head and looked at him, her clear grey eyes looking a little... burdened.

[So, my plan is to take it one step at a time. One little step after another, until all my enemies are dead. And that is why… my first step is to survive.]

Nephis shook her head, then looked back to the map of East Antarctica, which was currently being carved between Valor, Song, and the government.

A few moments, her voice resounded in his head once again, this time tinged with a hint of amusement.

[...Why, do you think that surviving this mayhem will be easy? It won't.]

Chapter-1106: Status Quo

Sunny was a bit thoughtful for the rest of the long strategy meeting.

Indeed… it wasn't going to be easy to survive the mad maelstrom that was brewing in Antarctica. He was strong and cunning, but in front of monsters like Whispering Blade and Beastmaster, all that strength could end up meaning nothing.

In fact, even the two tyrannical Saints were not guaranteed safety. When people like that had to be careful not to lose their lives, someone like Sunny or Nephis could only pray to the cold skies.

Sadly, the gods were dead, so their prayers were doomed to remain unanswered. So, they had to ensure their own survival.

Luckily, if there was one thing Sunny excelled at, it was staying alive.

'And biding my time.'

A legion of Nightmare Creatures on one side, two murderous armies of the Great Clans on the other… with Mordret hiding somewhere in the reflections, waiting to strike.

It was really time for Sunny to show what he was made of, and hope that it was enough. No… he had to make it so that what he could do was enough. And if it wasn't, he had to change himself in a way that would.

'But my task is not as ambitious as what these Legacies have to accomplish.'

That was perhaps the only saving grace in this grim situation.

Valor and Song wanted to crush the enemy and conquer the Black Pyramid. Nephis simply wanted to survive and earn the trust of her

enemies by being a good soldier… and maybe a little more than that.

As for Sunny, he simply wanted to make sure that their war did not spill out into the streets of the siege capitals, and that as few soldiers and civilians as possible were hurt by the clash of the great clans. And if he managed to hurt the bastards in the process, that would be even better.

…Still, it was not an easy thing to accomplish.

He listened to the discussion of strategy, thinking.

The whole meeting was both fruitful and ridiculous. The representatives of the great clans knew very well that they were going to be killing each other soon. However, they maintained an illusion of camaraderie, pretending to take the issues of the evacuation campaign seriously.

They had to keep up appearances, after all. That was possibly the most important advantage Sunny had.

Other than that, the broad strokes of what the near future would look like had been decided quickly.

Officially, everyone would work together to resist the Chain of Nightmares and make sure that the evacuation proceeded smoothly, with every human in the Southern Quadrant leaving the cursed continent eventually.

The territory of East Antarctica would be divided into three regions. The first one was going to remain in the purview of the government, with the two Legacy Saints that had been participating in the campaign from the start continuing to assist Wake of Ruin in resisting the tide of abominations.

Reading between the lines, that meant that Sky Tide and Dire Fang were going to remain on the sidelines for most of the clash. The main job of these two — at least for now — was to keep an eye on each other and make sure that the opponent could not be of assistance to the enemy side.

The other two regions would still be protected by the Evacuation

Army, but for all intents and purposes, the expedition forces of the great clans would be in charge. They were supposed to keep the siege capitals safe and hunt down especially powerful Nightmare Creatures. If one of the titans moved toward a human city, all Saints were supposed to join forces and eradicate it.

Of course, Wake of Ruin would not stop Whispering Blade and Beastmaster from trying to take down the titans in the wilderness before that even happened.

What it really meant was that the government was washing its hands and giving the great clans carte blanche to kill each other as much as they wanted, as long as it was done outside the walls of the siege capitals.

The true goal of Valor and Song was out there somewhere, in the wild reaches of Antarctica, after all. What they wanted was to find a Nightmare Gate that would allow them to safely ferry their forces into the Dream Realm, and eventually establish a stronghold that would serve as a staging ground for the conquest of the Tomb of Ariel.

But it wasn't that simple. They also needed to make sure that the enemy wouldn't get to the Citadel first, and the easiest way to accomplish that was to destroy the enemy.

There were more complications, as well…

For example, both Valor and Song announced a startling intention to permanently close as many Gates that had appeared within the limits of the siege capitals as they could. The hundreds of Awakened that each great clan had sent to Antarctica… were almost all meant to challenge the Seeds of Nightmare.

Certainly, their true purpose was to send as many soldiers into the hellish desert as possible, to scout it out and find a good entry point for the main force… but nevertheless, even if the scouts having to enter their Second Nightmares was just a side effect, that decision could forever change the balance of power among the Awakened.

There were not that many Masters in the world, and their number

was already starting to swell because of the Chain of Nightmares. The Awakened Song and Valor had sent were all absolute elites. If dozens, or maybe even a hundred or two of them Ascended, it would have an explosive effect on… everything.

But that was not what Sunny was concerned about. What worried him was the prospect of these scouts actually finding a great entry point behind one of the Nightmare Gates located inside the siege capitals, and not in the wilderness. If that happened… all hell could break loose.

And if they found not just an entry point, but a crossing to a spot that would serve as the key to reaching the Black Pyramid, nothing would stop the other party from making sure that the siege capital in question changed hands.

They would much rather see it destroyed, even, than remain under the control of the enemy.

'There will be three stages to this disaster. First, the clans will scout for a good entrance to the desert. Second, they will enter the Dream Realm through that entrance, and launch an expedition toward the Tomb of Ariel. Lastly, they will build strongholds in the vicinity of the pyramid, gather their forces, and launch their final attacks.'

The first stage would probably mostly consist of covert ambushes and small-scale skirmishes between the forces of Valor and Song. The second stage would be where the true bloodshed started. And the last… the last would be pure hell.

Sunny was now clear on the overall shape of the clan war, but he still had a lot of questions. He lacked information on what exactly they were going to do, when, and how.

So, just as Nephis had said, he was going to take it one step at a time.

The first step he had to take was to gather information.

Sitting silently at the back of the meeting room, Sunny glanced at the people who were gathered there — the high and mighty Saints of legendary renown — and smiled a little.

'Would you look at that. After all these years, it seems that I am finally going to get a chance to act as a proper spy...'

Chapter-1107: Spycraft

Spying on the Saints of the great clans sounded like an interesting method of killing himself, but Sunny was willing to try. His Aspect was tailor-made for stealth and infiltration, after all — it was just that he had not used that side of its powers as often as he would have wished to.

Sunny could not say that he was truly a master of stealth, but he was also not an amateur. He had relied on staying hidden a lot throughout the years of being an Awakened, from the ruined streets of the Dark City to the airy expanse of the Chained Isles and the cold hellscape of East Antarctica. In these past two months, especially, he had tried to remain unseen as often as possible.

The duties of a military scout demanded it, and through that necessity, Sunny had been able to develop his mastery of all things clandestine a notch further.

…A person could only rely on stealth that much, though. The most dire conflicts he tended to find himself in were almost all direct, violent confrontations.

Still, it was an exceptionally useful ability to have, and now, Sunny needed to exercise it to its fullest extent. He had been thinking about how exactly to approach that task for a long time now, and the conclusion was that he needed to be in several places at the same time to achieve the best result.

Thankfully, he was capable of doing just that… to a degree.

Sunny had five shadows now, and the range at which he could control them was quite large, exceeding twenty kilometers. Which meant that he could keep an eye on representatives of both Valor and Song, at least for the next few days — once they departed for different siege capitals, he would be forced to concentrate on only the

former.

So, Sunny left himself with one shadow — otherwise, he would look really conspicuous — and sent the other four to spy on the champions of the great clans.

The naughty shadow, as the new guy, remained glued to his feet. The haughty shadow was following Morgan. The happy shadow was following Madoc.

The gloomy shadow had been sent to spy on Beastmaster, and lastly, the creepy shadow was assigned to Ascended Bast — the man whom Sunny suspected to be possessed by Mordret.

Keeping track of what all of them saw and heard put a bit of strain on his mind, but mostly, Sunny could manage the pressure — although it was hard not to appear absentminded and clumsy in his personal interactions.

Considering that Sunny was in charge of managing a lot of logistical tasks as the middleman between the forces of Valor and the government, that was proving to be a challenge.

But the hardest part, of course, was not being caught by the people he was trying to spy on.

Sunny was not nearly naive enough to think that the glorious great clans had no means of detecting his shadows. Even if his Aspect made them nearly imperceptible when hidden in darkness — or even absolutely imperceptible, for mundane humans — there were all kinds of Memories and exotic Aspects out there.

For example, the first time he had met Noctis, the sorcerer was instantly aware of the presence of a hidden shadow. And that was without even knowing who Sunny was — the great clans, on the contrary, were well aware of his capabilities.

They might not have known the exact details of his Aspect, but they certainly knew of his affinity to shadows, as well as the general shape of what he was capable of. Shadow users were rare, but not so rare as to be unfamiliar to the Domains — Shadow Blade Kurt had belonged

to one of them, after all.

Therefore, it only made sense that the great clans would have countermeasures prepared, just in case. Sunny's goal was to overcome these countermeasures, or at least pierce through as many of them as he could and identify all the rest to stay away from them.

What helped him a lot in that task, surprisingly, was the experience of serving as a military scout. He had learned the basics of the necessary skills from Effie and the Dark City, as well as his own travels, and now developed them even further in the wilderness of East Antarctica.

Powerful Nightmare Creatures, much like powerful Awakened, had all kinds of strange abilities. So, the scouts had to learn a few strange rules — and a lot of odd tricks — to remain unseen by them.

For example, many creatures could feel a gaze directed at them, so Sunny had learned to never look straight at dangerous abominations, instead keeping them on the periphery of his vision. Other creatures could feel if someone was thinking about them, or hear if someone spoke their names aloud. So, Sunny had to learn how to keep his mind empty and choose his words… and thoughts… carefully.

There were a lot of tricks like that, but most importantly, one simply had to be smart and careful about it. Which was why, no matter how much he wanted to just go all out and listen to every word his marks said, Sunny took things slowly.

He kept his shadows at a safe distance at first, gradually getting closer and closer to the four Legacies. There was also a difference between how they acted in normal circumstances and how they acted when something important had to be discussed — the former was easier, while the latter could be nearly impossible to overhear.

Even Legacy Sleepers like Caster possessed Memories that could make it hard for anyone to listen in on important conversations — back in the Dark City, he had used one to create a cone of silence around the room where they talked. Someone like Morgan or Beastmaster, without a doubt, would have much more potent tools to prevent anyone from learning their secrets.

Sunny almost got caught a few times because of these measures.

For example, both Valor and Song used special Memories to create bubbles of evenly diffused, bright light while having meetings. Since the source of light was omnidirectional, and its brightness was perfectly the same, no shadow could exist within the bubble — a fact that he had learned the hard way, only avoiding a disaster thanks to his paranoia and caution.

And still, despite it all, Sunny managed to get closer and closer to Whispering Blade, Beastmaster, Morgan, and Bast. Although he was not able to infiltrate the most important meetings, he was still able to learn a lot, and piece together even more from small and seemingly unconnected pieces of information they let slip out.

He might not have managed to learn their most guarded secrets, yet.

But he did learn a few interesting things.

Chapter-1108: Gathering Information

Sunny was mostly interested in the details of what each of the two feuding clans had prepared for Antarctica… but those plans were tightly guarded by those who had been entrusted with them.

He suspected that learning the specifics of their strategy would become easier when the main forces of Valor and Song arrived in Antarctica — the more people involved in something, the harder it was to keep things secret. However, for now, only a handful of emissaries were here, all busy with rather transparent preparatory work.

That did not mean that he had failed to learn anything of use, of course.

Knowing the enemy's next move was immensely valuable, but knowing the enemy themselves was much more important. By observing his four marks, Sunny was slowly becoming familiar with how they acted, felt, and even thought.

When Beastmaster was standing on the city wall, observing a horde of Nightmare Creatures assaulting it with an eerily serene expression on her exquisitely beautiful face, Sunny's shadow was there, watching.

When Whispering Blade stopped to look at the mundane soldiers, a hint of detached pity finding its way into his calm eyes, Sunny's shadow was there, watching.

When Morgan practiced her swordsmanship, moving with grace and speed that would make the most famed warriors feel heavy in their hearts, Sunny's shadow was there, watching.

And when the bleak, unassuming Ascended Bast spent hours doing nothing, sitting like a corpse in a dark room, his shadow was there as well.

Of course, the small nuances of their personalities were not everything that Sunny learned. He gained a much better understanding of their abilities, as well.

Beastmaster was, indeed, a frightening being. Her powers lay in mesmerism and manipulation. From what he could tell, simply looking her in the eyes could be a death sentence. She could make her enemies defenseless by luring them into a state of deep trance, or bedevil them with insidious illusions. And, above all else, she could completely dominate someone's mind, making them an eternal thrall.

Whispering Blade was just as fearsome. Even though his powers were not as fiendish, they were just as deadly. His quintessential Ability was to make all weapons he wielded invisible — and his Saint Transformation was to be unseen, as well.

Since Saint Madoc was not nearly as mysterious and secretive as his counterpart from the Song clan, it was widely known that when he fought, it was as though the world itself was slicing the bodies of his enemies apart.

There was no escape.

Morgan, on the other hand, had a rather strange Aspect. If Whispering Blade possessed an Ability that made the sword he wielded deadlier, then Morgan… was the blade itself. The feeling of sharpness she emanated was not a coincidence.

The Princess of War did not need any weapons, because her body was the absolute weapon. She could cut through armored alloy and the flesh of even the most powerful Nightmare Creatures with her hands, and rend their bodies with her feet. It was both strange and terrifying, as though she was not a human, but a living sword.

…In retrospect, it made a lot of sense that she had easily cut through the adamantine breastplate of the Mantle of the Underworld with her bare hand.

'Wouldn't it mean that she cheated? She promised to only use a dormant weapon…'

That thought, strangely, led Sunny to discover a hint of what Morgan's Flaw was.

While observing her, he noticed that Morgan preferred clothes that revealed as little of her skin and body as possible… she even wore gloves, never appearing without them. Sometimes it was the gauntlets of her armor, and sometimes it was the slim, stylish leather gloves that went well with her tailored mundane clothes.

Because of that, Sunny started to suspect that the Princess of Valor was not in control of what her hands cut. Or rather, that everything she touched was doomed to be sliced and severed, as if carved by a sharp blade.

Perhaps the Flaw was not as powerful as her Ability — otherwise, her own armor would not be able to withstand it — but it was certainly a cruel extension of it.

Sadly, Sunny had no such luck in deducing the Flaws of Whispering Blade and Beastmaster.

And then… there was Bast.

Actually, Sunny had not learned anything about him at all. The bleak man was like a corpse that someone was wearing as a suit. He was quiet, dull, and devoid of much emotion. He never did much of anything, but was nevertheless treated with strange courtesy… deference, even… by Seishan, Beastmaster, and Dire Fang.

Bast did nothing, just waiting and biding his time.

But Sunny could swear that there was a menacing malevolence hiding behind the placid dullness of his eyes.

'What are you doing, bastard? What are your reflections doing? When are you going to strike?'

Sunny was not the only one who paid close attention to Bast. Even though they did not show it, Morgan and Madoc were tracking the

movements of the bleak Master as well.

In fact, he learned a few things about Mordret from the fragments of their conversations about the man.

For example, he learned that Anvil had personally crafted the enchanted talisman that protected Ascended Welthe from being possessed by her ward. He also learned Anvil's title… the King of Swords.

Apparently, the King of Swords had prepared a few more tools to trap and destroy his eldest child. However, both Whispering Blade and Morgan were hesitant to use them yet.

They were unnerved by Bast's inaction, too.

…Just like that, a few days passed. Sunny had been gathering information like a spider sitting in the middle of a vast web. He had not made any earth-shattering discoveries in that short time, but it was a good start. In truth, he was more concentrated on finding safe ways to get closer to his marks, for now, than on actually stealing their secrets.

Once he truly learned how to slither through their defenses, the secrets would be revealed as a result.

On the fourth day… it was time to say his goodbyes to Jet. Both Song and Valor were leaving the siege capitals to travel to the respective port fortresses and meet the arriving reinforcements.

After that, they would proceed to other cities, and the clandestine war would start in earnest.

Sunny was leaving with the emissaries of Valor, and Jet was leaving with the emissaries of Song. Chances were, they would not meet face-to-face for a long time.

He would have been worried if it was anyone else, but there was little doubt that Soul Reaper would be able to keep herself alive. He had already warned her to steer clear of the man who called himself Bast, just to be safe.

Really, the person Sunny had to worry about… was himself.

'I'll survive, too.'

But that was the thing… simply surviving was not enough. It had not been for a long time.

And that was what could get him killed.

With a sigh, Sunny called back the shadows that had been watching the emissaries of Song, and went to find Nephis.

It was time for the two of them to travel side by side once again.

Chapter-1109: Titanic Battle

On a vast plain peppered with twisting streams and shallow lakes, a cataclysmic battle was taking place. Legions of Nightmare Creatures were flowing across it like a dark tide, with several titanic figures marching among them. The ground shook with each of their steps, and the skies above were obscured by a whirlwind of hungry crows.

Humans fought against the abominations in the shadow of their wings.

Today, the forces of humanity gathered from all across Antarctica to stop the march of the titanic horde.

Seven Saints led them into battle.

There was Wake of Ruin, the Carrion Crow — a legendary figure who had been protecting the waking world since the times of the First Generation. Whispering Blade, the first blade of the great clan Valor, who had led countless Awakened warriors in the conquest of the Dream Realm.

There was Beastmaster, the fearsome and enchanting daughter of the great clan Song, and her sister, Silent Stalker, who was a huntress and a slayer of things. There was also Sky Tide of the White Feather clan and Dire Fang, a bestial warrior of incomparable savagery and strength.

There were close to a hundred Masters on the battlefield, as well, serving as champions and officers of the human army.

Sunny was one of these Masters.

As he watched the inconceivable scene of the clash between two mighty forces, awed by its scale and ferocity, there was only one thought in his mind:

'Holy hell.'

He had seen a lot of incredible things in his life, but all — with the exception of the visage of Hope — paled in comparison to this calamitous confrontation. It was, without a doubt, the largest battle that had happened since the start of the Antarctica campaign… and maybe even in the history of this world.

Sunny was currently high above the battlefield, in what served as the command center for the joined army of the government and the great clans.

The command center was situated in a stone fort… which stood on top of the carapace of a giant, monstrous tortoise. Which was one of Morgan's Echoes. Luckily, the Princess of Valor — the Princess of War — had not summoned it on the day of her arrival. Otherwise, the giant beast would have flattened the entire government building.

It was like a moving fortress.

Morgan herself was nearby, commanding the army. The Saints were busy fighting the Titans that led the horde, so they had no time to play the role of a detached strategist. The Princess of War, on the other hand, was a genius tactician — by now, no one put that fact in doubt despite her young age.

…Of course, Seishan was also here, keeping an eye out so that Morgan did not get any funny ideas.

So was Jet, Nephis, and Cassie.

Changing Star and the Fire Keepers were held in reserve for now, and would be sent out to close the gaps in the spot of the battlefield where the situation was the most dire. As for Song of the Fallen, she had proven to be an invaluable resource in such situations.

With her Ascended Ability allowing her to see through the eyes of soldiers throughout the battlefield, she could relay all necessary information to the commander in mere moments. With her help, Morgan's grasp of the situation was much more fluid and immediate.

Just at that moment, Cassie shifted a little, a subtle frown appearing

on her delicate face.

"...A Corrupted Devil is getting close to the Seventh Company of the Ursus Brigade. Its abilities are: mental manipulation, inducing fear, and augmenting itself through consumption. The Third Company of the Lyra Brigade is sustaining heavy casualties because of the change in terrain, caused by the burrower minions of the Fallen Tyrant, designation the Worm.

The Wolves have just reached the location of the Worm."

Morgan lingered for a moment, then glanced at the blind young woman. Her vermilion eyes had been glinting vibrantly since the start of the battle..

"You know Raised by Wolves personally, right? What is your estimation on how long it would take her to get rid of that Tyrant?"

Nephis answered instead, looking at a particular spot of the battlefield with a somber expression:

"...Around three minutes, give or take."

Morgan smiled.

"Fast! But… not fast enough. I will send one of the Echoes to speed things along."

She was ready to give the order, but stopped when Cassie suddenly spoke:

"Don't. Send it to reinforce Three Lyra instead."

Morgan glanced at her curiously.

"Why?"

The blind girl remained silent for a moment.

"The Ascended in charge of the Third Lyra Company is the only one whose Aspect directly counters the abilities of the Corrupted Demon, designation Frost Furnace. We must make sure that he preserves as

much essence as possible, for now. There is also a lake between the nearest Echo and the position of the Wolves. Traversing it will waste time."

The Princess of Valor smiled slightly.

"Correct. Good thinking."

With that, she continued to give orders, controlling the large army like the conductor of a giant, cacophonous orchestra. Cassie continued to provide firsthand accounts of what was happening on the battlefield and, from time to time, poignant pieces of advice.

Nephis remained silent… which was a bit strange, considering that she was no less knowledgeable about how to wage war on Nightmare Creatures. Nevertheless, Changing Star simply watched the havoc of the furious battle, her eyes heavy.

Sunny was willing to bet that he knew what she was thinking about.

…Because he was thinking the same thing.

Today was their first time seeing all the Saints of Antarctica go all out. And that… that was a priceless source of information — not the least because these mighty demigods would one day be Neph's own opponents.

The powers they showcased today would be turned against her in the future.

…And maybe against Sunny, too.

'Damn it. How scary.'

Looking at the battlefield, he could feel a cold chill running down his spine. It was a rare privilege to get the chance to see exalted figures like Whispering Blade and Beastmaster fight… and yet, Sunny did not feel consoled by their awesome powers.

Instead, he felt resigned.

Nevertheless, he couldn't look away.

Chapter-1110: Seven Saints

About a month had passed since the day Sunny was assigned to act as a government envoy for the forces of Valor. In that time, they had reached a distant port fortress, met up with the main contingent of the great clan — including Cassie, the Fire Keepers, and the valiant Saint Summer Knight — and traveled to the region that was supposed to be their zone of responsibility.

However, almost as soon as they settled in one of the siege capitals there, Wake of Ruin requested the emissaries of both great clans to join forces against a tremendous horde of Nightmare Creatures that had formed around several Titans.

They emissaries had promised to join forces if the situation required it, after all — and it certainly did. If the horde was not stopped, their plans were bound to suffer, as well. So, they reluctantly answered Saint Cor's summons and ventured into the wilderness to form a united army.

Valor and Song were hellbent on destroying each other, but that did not mean that they couldn't cooperate. Once faced with a common enemy, the champions of the two warring Domains at least had the decency to not strike their opponents in the back… or at least they hadn't yet.

Mordret was suspiciously absent from the battlefield, though. Who knew what "Ascended Bast" was doing right now?

Actually, Sunny knew exactly what he was doing. Jet was doing him a favor by keeping an eye on the bleak man, so Sunny was well-informed on Master Bast's movements. He was currently in a siege capital far to the west, establishing a supply chain for Song's expedition forces, which prowled the wilderness in search of suitable Nightmare Gates.

Ascended Bast was also in charge of an industrial production facility. In that facility, he… was making mirrors. Thousands of them, for unknown reasons.

Or at least he had been a few days ago. Currently, Jet was right here by Sunny's side, watching the battlefield with a hungry expression. For all they knew, the bleak man might have slaughtered the entire siege capital by now.

Jet suddenly raised her head.

"There! Look!"

Everyone except for Cassie looked up.

In the skies above them, a titanic clash was taking place. Myriads of crows were swirling like a black maelstrom, and in the middle of it, two giant shapes were entangled in a murderous dance.

One was a giant bird of prey with white feathers and talons forged out of lustrous steel, her wings wreathed in lightning and thunderclouds. The other was a scaled beast with three long necks and three terrifying maws, its enormous body held up in the air by vast, skeletal wings.

The scaled beast was littered with thousands of wounds from the swarm of crows assaulting it, but it did not seem bothered by their merciless attacks. Instead, a miasma of rot and corruption flowed from the numerous torn holes on its body, trailing behind the titan and spreading through the sky like a cloud of pure, inescapable death.

Saint Tyris had been controlling the winds to blow the cloud away from the battlefield, but right at that moment, the crows suddenly dashed away from the winged horror. A split second later, it was encased in a cage of lightning, and then, the white bird flew through the lightning to crash directly into the giant beast.

Her talons tore at its chest, and her beak closed on one of its necks, ripping it to shreds. Sky Tide jerked her head violently, and severed the neck of the titan completely.

As vile miasma billowed from the terrible wound like a fountain, the head of the creature plummeted down and crashed into the ground, obliterating several hundreds of Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny clenched his fists, then looked away from the aerial battle.

Breathtaking and terrifying things were happening on the ground, as well.

In one corner of the battlefield, a mountain of malformed flesh was crawling across the plain, absorbing everything in its path into itself. Those Nightmare Creatures that were unfortunate enough to approach it were instantly caught by fleshy tentacles, drawn into the body of the ghastly titan, and consumed, becoming a part of it.

If the mountain of flesh reached the defense line of the human army, the same fate awaited the soldiers. However, it did not get the chance.

Long before the titan drew close to the ranks of Awakened, a lone figure stepped forward from between them, and then… disappeared. Sunny saw the moment clearly, but even still, it seemed as though Whispering Blade had never been there at all.

In the next moment, something both spectacular and terrifying happened.

It was as though a wide, bloody path was carved through the horde of Nightmare Creatures by an invisible force. No one could see what was delivering the cuts, but countless abominations were instantly turned into minced meat. Gaping wounds simply appeared on their bodies, as if the creatures were sliced apart by an unseen blade.

No… a swarm of unseen blades. A wave of them.

The wave rolled through the horde, rending everything in its path, and soon reached the crawling mountain of flesh. Countless tentacles wreathed, trying to catch whoever was attacking the titan — however, all they caught was air. Meanwhile, bloody lacerations started to appear on the surface of the flesh mountain, sometimes several at a time, each dozens of meters in length, and extremely

deep.

Tentacles were severed, and sent flying away… only to crawl back like fleshy snakes. Despite suffering dire wounds, the titan was not succumbing to the assault of invisible blades, yet. But it had stopped completely, letting the soldiers sigh with relief.

In another spot of the battlefield, a man in lustrous armor was wielding a lance that seemed to be made of clear water to cut through a sea of grey vines that grew from the ground with terrifying speed. The brooks, rivers, and lakes around him seemed to have turned into weapons, as well.

Streams of water rose from them and flew through the air like whips, cleanly slicing through the vines and washing them away.

The Summer Knight remained calm and composed as he faced the wrath of the unseen titan. He welcomed its attention — because it lessened the pressure on two different Saints.

Deep in the area completely consumed by the grey vines, a creature that resembled a towering, monstrous mix between a human and a wolf was clawing at the ground, digging into it with vicious purpose. With each movement, countless vines were torn apart, and a great deal of soil was displaced.

The giant fiend — Saint Dire Fang — was being assaulted by the vines from all sides. However, very few reached him. Most were cut down by Summer Knight, and those that were not ended up being obliterated by heavy arrows that flew from the fringes of the battlefield, where Silent Stalker moved, unseen.

And finally, there was the last titan — a ghostly figure surrounded by shimmering haze, which moved across the battlefield like a mirage. Wherever it passed, the reality itself seemed to twist and come undone, revealing indescribable horrors.

The Nightmare Creatures who gazed at the mirages grew still and silent, then moved again… or rather, their bodies moved, as if worn by something not quite familiar with what flesh was, and how beings made of flesh were supposed to carry themselves through space.

No Awakened barred their path, and neither did any Saint.

However… abominations did. First a few, then a dozen, then a hundred… and finally, an avalanche of them threw themselves into the shimmering haze, trying to disperse it. Each of them had clawed their eyes out before attacking, driven mad by a strange and overwhelming desire to destroy the ghostly titan at any cost.

The Nightmare Creatures who had been possessed by the haze were torn apart by other abominations, as well.

It was as if Beastmaster was laughing at the harrowing creature… you can possess the bodies of living beings? So what? I can take their minds, their hearts, and their very souls. Let's see which one of us is more harrowing!

Sunny stared, feeling both stirred and grim.

Such power…

Would he hold such power one day?

If he did… he would be laughing too.

Chapter-1111: War Games

The Seven Saints were battling the Titans. The echoes of their dreadful clash spread like shockwaves through the horde of Nightmare Creatures. Somewhere far away, a vestige of the horde suddenly surged and swirled, lunging at something unseen. A moment later, a bloody haze veiled that entire section of the battlefield from view, and the wind carried over howls of agony… which all fell silent soon.

Silent Stalker was prowling there, slaughtering the abominations and never failing to send her arrows to support Dire Fang and Summer Knight. The latter had yet to assume his Transcendent form, as well.

Beastmaster and Whispering Blade were each holding back a titan of their own, and Sky Tide had just succeeded in delivering a debilitating wound to the great scaled beast, dispersing the cloud of deathly miasma created by the flying horror at the same time.

All in all, things weren't looking bad.

…Which was not to say that the battle was going smoothly. Far from it — the titanic horde did not just consist of the four titans, and it was the task of Awakened and Ascended to face the vast legion of abominations.

While not as spectacular, that task was just as important.

Sunny watched the battle grow more and more fierce. All the while, Cassie continued to keep them informed of the more important changes happening on the battlefield.

Her voice was calm and composed:

"...The Fallen Tyrant, designation Worm, has been slain."

"...Third Company of the Lyra Brigade is advancing to support the Fifth."

"...The Corrupted Demon, designation Frost Furnace, has been slain."

"...Ascended Yujin of the First Company of the Cassiopeia Brigade has fallen."

"...The Corrupted Devil, designation Hexblade, has been slain by Ascended Nightingale. It would be prudent to temporarily withdraw the Nightsingers from the flashpoint Delta."

At first, the good news was mixed with the bad news in equal measure. Morgan continued to react to the changes on the battlefield, moving her many pieces around to present an almost flawless defense against the onslaught of Nightmare Creatures. The battle formation created by her was fluid and flexible, bending when needed and lashing out with tremendous force at other times.

In fact, it seemed that Cassie and her were not just reacting, but actually anticipating many of the changes on the chaotic battlefield. It was a lot like personal combat — being able to anticipate what move the enemy would make was half the victory. The other half was using that knowledge to deliver a fatal strike.

…Sadly, there was a limit to what Morgan could do. No matter how good she was, the enemy facing them was just too dreadful. The Princess of War remained calm, but her face was slowly growing grim.

As time went on, Cassie's reports began to sound more and more dire.

"...Seventh Company of the Ursus Brigade is routed."

"...First Company of the Cassiopeia Brigade is suffering heavy casualties."

"...Ascended Ripple of the Seven Ursus has fallen."

"...First Company of the Cassiopeia Brigade is routed."

"...Defensive line is breached. Wolves and Nightsingers are advancing

to seal the breach. I… I don't think they'll be able to hold out."

Morgan remained silent for a few moments, then nodded slowly.

"Yes. That is… troublesome."

Sunny stared at her silently. To use the word "troublesome" was the understatement of the century. With both layers of the defensive line breached, the Nightmare Creatures would be free to pour through and attack the formation from the rear. Once they did, one company after another would collapse, causing a fatal cascade.

There were forces that could be pulled back from other places the battlefield to plug the breach, but they needed time to reach it.

Morgan glanced at Nephis and suddenly smiled.

"How about it, dear sister? Are you ready to solve that problem for me?"

Neph looked at the battlefield, then turned her head slightly and nodded.

"It is the reason why you have held me in reserve, is it not?"

Morgan laughed.

"Indeed. Take your Fire Keepers and go, then… show these abominations what a daughter of Valor is capable of."

Changing Star simply turned away, ready to jump down from the stone fort onto the carapace of the giant tortoise. However, at that moment, Sunny finally spoke:

"Can I go, too?"

Morgan — and Seishan, as well — gave him surprised glances. After a short moment, the Princes of War asked:

"Really? But you don't have to, Master Sunless. As a government envoy, your duties are simply to serve as a messenger between us and your Army Command. In fact, it would be very embarrassing for me

if the envoy entrusted to Clan Valor went and died."

Sunny frowned.

"Really. It would be very embarrassing for me, too, so I'll make sure to stay alive."

Morgan smiled... it seemed that there was some approval in her smile. She gave him a nod.

"Well… in that case, by all means. You were designated as a Special Strategic Asset, after all. I'd imagine that you can handle yourself on the battlefield."

After that, she gave Seishan a short glance, as if mocking the heiress of Song for having a less capable government spy assigned to her.

Jet stretched her arms, looking down with a hungry glint in her eyes.

"Then I'll join, too. Watching all this slaughter got me riled up."

She seemed very comfortable playing into her reputation as a psychotic killer. Neither Morgan nor Seishan said anything, at least.

Without delaying any further, Nephis, Sunny, and Jet jumped down to the carapace of the giant Echo, then slid off its side and landed on the ground near where the Fire Keepers were waiting, ready to do battle.

Noticing them, the survivors of the Dark City broke out in smiles.

"Lady Nephis! Are you deploying? Finally!"

"Hey, Sunny! Where is your armor? Hurry up and summon it!"

"Oh, man… Sunny is with us. Effie and Night are fighting, too. Lady Nephis is in charge… feels like the good old times!"

"What good old times, you fool? What was good about those times? Get your head on straight…"

Nephis looked at them with her calm, cold grey eyes… and then

smiled.

Her smile seemed to illuminate the gloomy autumn day like a ray of sunshine.

"Yes, we are being deployed. Get ready and follow me. What can these pathetic abominations do to us? Nothing! Let us burn their filth from this world!"

The Fire Keepers looked at her with expressions of adoration and zealous devotion, passionate fires igniting in their eyes. Their voices joined in a choir:

"Follow Lady Changing Star!"

"Burn them!"

"Burn them all!"

Sunny observed them with a neutral expression as he gathered shadows around him and summoned the Sin of Solace… which immediately started whispering insidious provocations into his ears, a vague figure materializing a few steps away and following behind him.

He ignored the hallucination and shook his head in reproach.

'What a bunch of crazies…'

Chapter-1112: Different Kind of Deception

Led by Nephis, Sunny, and Jet, the Fire Keepers surged forward. They were aiming for the section of the joint army's formation where the flood of Nightmare Creatures had broken through the dam of human bodies, threatening to consume them all.

Somewhere out there, far ahead, Effie and Kai were already trying to stall the fatal advance of the frenzied abominations as they waited for reinforcements to arrive. Their soldiers were fighting fiercely, without a doubt — and yet, the horde had already gained momentum, so the Wolves and the Nightsingers had no hope of stopping it on their own.

They were just two hundred men and women who had volunteered to join the Second Army, after all — no matter how elite of a status the two companies earned because of their strength, valor, and the fame of their commanders, they were still ordinary Awakened.

The Fire Keepers were different.

Even though there were just about fifty of them, each of the people following Changing Star was a seasoned veteran of the Dark City — they were the best and the brightest of what humanity had to offer, simply for the fact that nothing less would have allowed one to survive the cruel crucible of the Forgotten Shore.

They had only grown stronger and more experienced under Cassie's guidance after escaping that starless abyss, too, and especially now that the mighty — and opulent — clan Valor stood behind the personal troops of its adopted daughter.

The Fire Keepers had undergone a comprehensive upgrade of their soul arsenals, with those who needed it receiving enough shards to

finish fully saturating their cores.

There were seven cohorts of them, each more than comparable to the most elite household troops of the great clans in terms of power. So, despite their modest numbers, the Fire Keepers were a force to be reckoned with.

…And that was without even mentioning the three masters who were leading them into battle.

Due to their superior physical prowess, Sunny, Nephis, and Jet naturally ended up at the head of the rushing force. There was no clever plan to their advance — the situation prohibited careful maneuvering and strategic placement of the Awakened according to their specializations. But there was no real need to waste time on it, either.

Every Fire Keeper knew what they were doing. The remains of the Dreamer Army had long become a well-oiled, perfectly synergized combat machine. They all knew what their comrades were good at, what quirks their Aspects and Memories possessed, and how to work together in a seamless, deadly harmony.

…Well, maybe Sunny did not quite know all those things, exactly. He was more or less familiar with what the members of Cassie's former personal cohort were capable of, as well as a few other people with whom he had fought side by side during the civil war of the Bright Castle. Really, he lacked the qualifications to effectively lead these veteran warriors.

However, that was fine. He didn't want to lead anyone, anyway… Sunny was more than happy to leave all that to Nephis today. His role was quite simple — to wreak as much havoc and destruction among the Nightmare Creatures as he could. That way, he would bring the most benefit to the men and women fighting by his side.

His desire to show how lethal he could be in a battle had a different purpose, as well. Sunny wanted the others — Morgan and Seishan in particular — to witness how much of a fierce force he was on the battlefield. Having some respect from the representatives of the great clans would be convenient in the coming months… but mostly, he

wanted to deceive them.

People were usually good at one thing or another… great fighters were very rarely amazing utility specialists, and people specializing in subterfuge were usually less capable in direct combat. Of course, there were always freaks like Sunny, who could do anything, from swinging a sharp sword to weaving Memories. But they were rare enough for a subconscious bias to subtly deny their existence.

The more capable of a fighter Sunny would show himself to be, the harder it would become for people who didn't know him to assume that he also possessed other formidable abilities, like excelling in stealth or being a master of utility.

It was a different kind of deception.

In the past, Sunny had tried extremely hard to remain under the radar, hiding his power to appear weak and insignificant. That ship, sadly, had long sailed — after coming to Antarctica, he was forced to reveal enough of his strength so that no sane person would ever think of him as a weakling. So, now, he needed a new disguise.

And today was the day he would start to create it.

'Come on, look at me… look at the Devil of Antarctica. Am I not strong? Am I not fearsome? Am I not a frenzied beast, just like what a lofty Legacy would expect an uneducated brute from the outskirts to be?'

As Sunny ran, he gathered the shadows from the Shadow Lantern around his body, manifesting them into the shape of a towering, four-armed fiend. He wielded the Sin of Solace in one hand, the Cruel Sight in another — the other two remained free, to be used to tear the enemies apart with sharp claws or switch to a two-hand grip of the jade jian on the fly.

A moment later, he circulated his essence and activated the [Mantle] trait of the Marble Shell. A fearsome armor of black onyx suddenly encased the tenebrous Shadowspawn into an impervious carapace, coming together with a dull clangor.

Sunny was not going to use finesse and cunning tricks today… no, what he was going for was maximum carnage, maximum barbarity. The more feral he appeared, the better.

God knew he had some pent-up anger to vent.

They had already flashed through the ranks of the retreating soldiers that belonged to the crushed companies. He could already see the Wolves and the Nightsingers fighting ahead, stubbornly refusing to give ground to the onslaught of abomination. A glimpse of Effie's lustrous steel figure ignited his heart, flooding his body with strength and vigor.

There were… really, really a lot of Nightmare Creatures in front of him.

'Damn.'

Sunny summoned the Dying Wish, slotting it into the Mantle and activating the [Underworld Armament] trait of the onyx armor.

'Now, for the finishing touch…'

Finally, he summoned the Extraordinary Rock, placing it into the mouth of the Shadowspawn and activating the [Sonorous] enchantment to make the transferred voice sound as loud as possible.

As the Fire Keepers closed in on the desperate melee, the towering four-armed fiend that moved at the head of Changing Star's force raised his horned head…

And let out an earth-shattering, chilling, bloodthirsty roar.

For a moment, it seemed as though the whole battlefield around them was momentarily frozen.

Even the Nightmare Creatures seemed a little taken aback.

Cradled in the embrace of shadows, Sunny smiled with satisfaction.

'Yes… I think that will do the trick…'

Chapter-1113: Rampaging Spawn of Shadows

Sunny's life had been pretty complicated as of late.

But right now, it was very simple. All he had to do was… kill.

Kill, kill, kill.

Even the Sin of Solace seemed to be enjoying the spectacle.

There was no more hiding, no more caution, and no more trying to undersell his abilities… well, at least the most obvious and visible of his abilities. Sunny had much more tricks up his sleeve, and in fact, this display of power was meant to misdirect his opponents and draw their attention away from his more insidious talents.

However, even that did not matter right now.

All that mattered was murder.

…Dashing through the formation of the Wolves and Nightsingers like a lightning made of darkness, Sunny tore into the tide of Nightmare Creatures. The echo of his deafening roar was still rolling across the battlefield when the Sin of Solace reaped its first life. It passed through the body of a massive abomination, easily rending it into two halves.

[You have slain a…]

[Your shadow grows…]

'It was a Fallen, huh?'

Sunny had activated the [Omen of Dread] enchantment of the jade sword, just for good measure. The faint remnant of a whisper of

Ariel, the Demon of Dread, lingered on the cursed blade — all beings who witnessed it had no choice but to be stricken by terror.

The Nightmare Creatures seemed to slow down a little. The Awakened soldiers behind him trembled, too…

However, they were also being affected by the Dying Wish. Fear and inspiration fused together in their hearts to produce savage awe. The soldiers surged forward, their spirits ignited with killing intent.

The abominations, meanwhile, were being assaulted both by the feeling of fear and the irresistible desire to rip the dreadful four-armed fiend to shreds above all else. Such a contradiction was enough to drive one mad…

'Good. Give me madness… give me insanity… the more, the better!'

Didn't the Sin of Solace feel especially light, sharp, and lethal today?

Maybe it was just the effect of his body being augmented by five shadows…

Full of rapturous malice, Sunny continued to move.

His mind was cold, calculating, and full of dark, murderous glee. His shell was brimming with so much power that it seemed as though it would soon burst at the seams. His hands moved faster than his thoughts.

'Kill…'

The jade sword flashed through the air, sending an abomination's head flying away in a fountain of blood. The Cruel Sight pierced the throat of another and ignited with incandescent light, filling the air with the smell of burnt flesh. His tail shot forward, the armored spike on its tip shattering a monstrous abomination's temple.

Sunny whipped his tail, throwing the collapsing corpse into the mob of beasts.

All of it took a split second.

'Kill…'

A monster lunged at him, its maw full of sharp fangs. Sunny caught it with his two lower hands, his armored gauntlets scraping against bone, and tore the creature's jaws apart. At the same time, he severed another abomination from top to bottom with the pristine blade of the Sin of Solace.

At the same time, he gutted a third one with the silver shortsword that was burning with the immolating heat of divine flames.

'All of you, die!'

At the same time…

Nephis entered the melee.

Changing Star was wearing the black armor forged by the smiths of Valor, wielding a sword that seemed to be made of pure white flame. Her silver hair flew in the wind like a radiant crown, and on her forehead was a simple band of metal adorned by a single gem… the Dawn Shard.

All around them, the Memories wielded by the Awakened soldiers suddenly grew vastly more powerful.

Neph's skin was suffused with a brilliant white glow. She looked like a spirit of pristine flame, and in front of her, the Nightmare Creatures seemed to melt and turn to ash. Her incandescent sword moved with such speed and precision that it was almost invisible.

All that could be seen was the carnage left in its wake.

Sunny had not seen Nephis fight in a long, long time… he had almost forgotten how beautiful her skill was.

But she was an Ascended now, and so, swordsmanship was not her only tool.

As the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures she had slain caught fire, that fire swelled and moved, as if being controlled by an invisible will. The air rippled from the unbearable heat, and the flames surged

forward in an immolating wave. A deafening explosion rang, ripping a dozen abominations apart.

As Changing Star moved through the mass of them, the fires moved with her like a whirlwind, burning and incinerating the Nightmare Creatures in her path.

Tearing an APC-sized monster limb from limb, Sunny frowned.

'That won't do… she's stealing my spotlight…'

At that moment, Jet finally joined them, followed by the Fire Keepers. The tide of abominations was momentarily pushed back.

Neph's voice drowned out the cacophony of battle:

"Spread out! Hold the line! Ascended, step forward!"

The seven cohorts of the Fire Keepers separated, reinforcing the faltering line of the Wolves and the Fire Keepers. At the same time, five figures stepped forward to become the wavebreakers against the flood of abominations.

Nephis, Sunny, Effie, Kai… and Jet.

'What a fearsome quintet…'

Sunny spared a split second to appreciate the image of them standing against the tide of Nightmare Creatures, and then threw all unnecessary thoughts out of his mind.

His task had only grown harder.

Now, he had to outdo all these monstrous talents.

Commanding the Extraordinary Rock to let out a harrowing growl — one stolen from the demented Corrupted Devil, Myriad Eater, no less — he launched himself forward.

The Sin of Solace whispered as it severed flesh and bone.

The Cruel Sight sang.

Claws, fangs, and spikes rang against the onyx surface of the Mantle.

The Nightmare Creatures shrieked, howled, and wailed as they died.

The four-armed fiend had turned into a dark maelstrom as he slaughtered one abomination after another… sometimes two, three, four at a time. The weaker monsters fell like autumn leaves in front of his blades and claws, the stronger ones were obliterated in a most cold and ruthless way.

There were no ingenious schemes to how Sunny fought, no cunning tricks — just pure, savage, calmly calculated butchery.

The soldiers behind him were looking at the rampaging spawn of shadows with awe in their eyes. Sunny did not pay their gazes a lot of attention... however, he did regret not leaving a shadow to keep an eye on Morgan and Seishan. He was a bit curious about their reactions.

But only a bit. Killing as many abominations as he could, as fast as he could, was much more important.

The radiant Changing Star, the steel-bodied Raised by Wolves, the swift and deadly Nightingale, the death incarnate, Soul Reaper Jet… and the Devil of Antarctica, the most fiendish of them all.

The five of them brought the horde of Nightmare Creatures to a halt.

For a while…

Chapter-1114: Bloody Brilliant

It was a strange thing to see…

The remnants of the Dreamer Army were fighting against an overwhelming horde of Nightmare Creatures, with the members of Changing Star's cohort leading them. It was almost as if they had gathered to reenact the ruinous siege of the Crimson Spire.

Of course, not everyone who had participated in that battle was here — but most were. Out of the hundred or so Sleepers that had returned from the Forgotten Shore, more than a half chose to follow Cassie, and were now fighting for Nephis.

A few decided to stay independent, like Sunny or Aiko, a few joined lesser Legacy clans, while the second-largest group — the surviving Handmaidens — followed Seishan into the embrace of the great clan Song.

The former Handmaidens were here on the battlefield, too, although not in this exact spot.

'It's like a morbid reunion…'

The Fire Keepers were fighting like the expert slayers they were — no abomination, no matter how terrifying, could shake their fighting spirit and resolve. Not because they were fearless, but simply because the survivors of the Forgotten Shore had been inoculated against the fear of Nightmare Creatures by being exposed to too much of it, too early, and with too harrowing results.

It was especially clear how out of the norm they were in contrast with the ordinary Awakened that comprised the two elite companies — the Wolves and Nightsingers. No matter how brave and capable the Awakened under the command of Effie and Kai were, they simply could not compare to the unflinching lethality of the eerily calm Fire

Keepers.

And, of course, the members of Changing Star's cohort were the deadliest of them.

Effie was like a wall of steel. Nothing could move her, and nothing could move past her — all the abominations could do was die, either pierced by her spear or broken by her shield.

Kai was swift, elusive, and unpredictable. The months of fighting a bitter war against Solvane's zealots in the Nightmare had forged him into a more capable warrior than he was giving himself credit for — the enchanting young man moved like wind among the abominations, cutting them down with his sharp saber. His ivory armor seemed to shine as it reflected Changing Star's light.

Nephis herself was like a radiant omen of death. Her ruthless sword seemed inescapable, and where it could not reach, incinerating flames reached instead. Shining like a beacon of light in the dark sea of Nightmare Creatures, she was without a doubt the heart of the battle, and the guiding star that kept hope alive in the hearts of the struggling soldiers.

As long as the Immortal flame burned... humanity would not be extinguished. Even those who were indifferent to such sentimental proclamations were compelled to believe it now, watching the beautiful white radiance of Changing Star's light devour the dark tide of Nightmare Creatures.

There was Jet, as well. Although not a part of the former Dreamer Army, she was no less deadly than the rest of them… maybe even more so. There was nothing particularly flashy about how she fought, but nonetheless, the number of dead abominations surrounding her was staggering. The more of them died, the more alive she looked… it was a sight both disturbing and beautiful.

And lastly, there was Sunny.

In the past, he had perhaps been the most unassuming member of Changing Star's cohort. Every impossible feat he had performed, every improbable victory he had achieved — all of it had happened

where no one could bear witness… very much so by design.

Today, however, Sunny was at the center of everyone's attention.

…Because he was just too savage, brutal, and domineering.

The slaughter he was perpetrating could only be described as barbarous.

Towering at three meters of height, crowned by twisting horns, and clad in fearsome onyx armor, the frenzied four-armed fiend tore through the Nightmare Creatures like a man possessed by a devil. Or was he a devil possessed by a man? All four of his hands were sleek with blood. His armor was slick with blood…

Even his face was covered in blood, because Sunny had used his sharp teeth to bite through an abomination's throat at some point, finding it more convenient than bringing his sword around.

He did not know if he was the deadliest of the five Masters today…

But he was definitely the most eye-catching.

And frightening.

The Sin of Solace laughed.

Sunny laughed, as well.

His laughter escaped from between the fangs of the shadowspawn shell as a ragged breath.

'Ah, it's really funny… we are all going to die…'

Indeed, despite how excellent the Fire Keepers were, and how deadly their leaders were, the situation did not look good.

And it was for one simple reason — the Awakened and the Masters were putting on a splendid fight, felling countless abominations and preventing the horde from pouring into the breach. The titans were tied up by the Saints, and without them, there was nothing on the battlefield that the five of them could not face.

If it were any other group of Ascended, perhaps things would have been different. But they were not just any Masters. They were perhaps the five most powerful Masters alive… not counting monsters like Mordret and Morgan.

But there was one big problem with that.

The problem was that their essence, as well as the essence of their soldiers, was being slowly depleted, while the tide of abominations was seemingly endless. Only Jet could fight indefinitely, but she alone was not enough to change the scales of this massive battle.

Sunny wondered if he should summon Nightmare and Saint. He felt really tempted to…

But something was holding him back.

Slicing through a Corrupted Demon and emerging from the severed carcass to thrust the blade of the Cruel Sight into the chest of a howling abomination, he briefly glanced in the direction where a revolting mountain of flesh was being slowly carved apart by invisible swords.

Sunny… was pretty sure that, together with Neph, he could take down one of these Titans.

Perhaps he wouldn't be able to do it alone, not without substantial preparations at least. And perhaps Changing Star wouldn't be able to do it alone, either. But together, they could.

All they would have to do, really, was bestow all of their blessings — all of his shadows and all the heat of Neph's flame — onto Saint, and send her forth. His taciturn devil was already immensely powerful, and if her strength were augmented fifteen times over, even a Corrupted Titan would perhaps have to retreat.

A Fallen one would just die.

However, it was not the Titans Sunny was worried about.

It was the Saints.

Today, they were fighting Nightmare Creatures. But one day soon, they would most likely have to fight one or several of the seven Saints dominating the battlefield.

Whispering Blade, Beastmaster, Summer Knight, Silent Stalker, Dire Fang… perhaps even Saint Tyris.

There was Mordret, too. And Morgan, and Seishan.

These people were no less frightening than the Titans. Actually, they could be considered more terrifying than the dreaded Nightmare Creatures.

So, Sunny was reluctant to reveal his hand. His life could very well depend on it.

'Well…'

Without ever slowing his bloody rampage, he started considering his options. If Sunny wanted to do something drastic, he had to do it now, while his reserves of essence were still somewhat substantial.

He thought long and hard… as he continued killing one abomination after another in increasingly wild and ruthless ways, making the soldiers pale in sickened awe... and in the end, Sunny decided to do nothing.

'Cassie must have a plan.'

It had not escaped his attention that the blind girl subtly manipulated the events of the battle, making sure that the Fire Keepers, the Wolves, and the Nightsingers — the three units led by the members of Changing Star's cohort — ended up together in this particular spot of the battlefield.

If she had put them here, she must have been reasonably certain that they would not be swallowed up by the horde.

As for how they would prevail…

Sunny decided that he did not really care.

Today, he would care only about one thing — how to kill many, many Nightmare Creatures. As many of them as possible.

Kill, kill, kill…

The Sin of Solace laughed, its voice full of gleeful amusement.

"Yes! Right! Kill them all!"

Chapter-1115: Creatures of Light and Darkness

Focusing solely on causing as much devastation as possible, Sunny slaughtered the Nightmare Creatures. The power of the fully augmented shadow fiend shell was staggering… that power was so great, in fact, that getting drunk on it was simply too easy.

However, he did not. His savage butchery was just for show… even though Sunny had allowed himself to gleefully dive into the battle frenzy, the core of his mind remained cold and clear. The more abominations he slayed, the more somber that part of his consciousness became.

'What the hell is Morgan doing?'

The Fire Keepers were supposed to hinder the advance of the Nightmare Creatures until reinforcements were pulled out from other parts of the battlefield to repair the breach in the army's formation. They had done that, already… but the reinforcements never arrived.

Had another crisis prevented Morgan from sending more companies to replace them?

…Or was something else at play?

Sunny did not know, and he had no time to care. He might have made it look as though cutting through numerous abominations was effortless for him, and in fact brought him nothing but vicious joy, but it was really not an easy task.

He was strong, fast, and immensely skilled. His armor and weapons were outstanding, too… however, there were just too many enemies pressing down on the five Masters as their soldiers. The horde of Nightmare Creatures truly seemed endless.

Even if most of these abominable creatures were not strong enough to threaten Sunny, and easy to kill, the sheer number of them posed a threat. His task was not just to withstand the flood of monsters, but to cut through it, breaking its momentum.

And that… was a perilous task. Sunny had to watch his every step, and keep the next dozen steps in mind. Otherwise, it would be too easy to end up in a situation where there was no next step to take.

Granted, he could carve his way out of many situations that would have doomed a different Ascended. But still, Sunny had to be careful about where he moved and what he did.

The others were struggling with the same issue. Kai had it the easiest, since his speed and the ability to fly made maneuvering around the battlefield almost a non-issue. Nephis had some breathing room, too, because her flames could clear out the space around her.

Sunny, Effie, and Jet were starting to struggle, though. Chances were, they would have to retreat back into the formation of the Awakened soon — once that happened, the formation itself would come under much more strain.

'...Not yet, though.'

He was not done playing the role of a dark slayer, yet.

Nestled within the embrace of shadows, Sunny gritted his teeth and continued to fight. This… this was good, really. He had missed that feeling, the feeling of giving it your all and fighting with your very life on the line.

Back in the Antarctic Center, he had always been like a detached observer. He had played the role of a person who was just as desperate and frightened as everyone else around him, but that was a lie. He wasn't. Sunny had just allowed himself to lose himself in the role.

In truth, he had rarely been in true danger in the past few months. It had always been the lives of others that he desperately wanted to preserve, not his own. The times when Sunny found himself in mortal

danger in Antarctica had been few, and the forces aligned against him back then were too insurmountable to fight. All he could do was escape.

Even the Winter Beast… his own life had not been at risk until the very end.

It was the same now. However, Sunny had tricked himself into feeling that it wasn't.

And so, he killed the Nightmare Creatures.

He killed as many as there were.

He slayed the weaker abominations with ease, almost in passing — his towering figure seemed to move with the vicious, blood-chilling grace of a natural killer. Red mist and howls of agony surrounded him like a dark mantle.

The stronger abominations took some time to bring down, but they inevitably fell, as well. There were too few beings in Antarctica that could withstand his strength, his skill, and the perfect sharpness of the Sin of Solace. The only creatures here that could give Sunny pause were the Devils, simply because their powers were varied and unpredictable.

But, by now, there were enough tools in his toolbox to handle most of these threats. It was just a matter of identifying the strengths of the enemy, and finding a way to turn that strength into a weakness.

Everyone and everything fell under his blade. Slowly, a mound of corpses grew in front of Sunny, forming a natural barrier against the advancing horde. At first, he was pleased by the additional protection the morbid palisade presented.

But once the mound grew tall enough, the Nightmare Creatures started lunging at Sunny from above. That… was not ideal…

However, Sunny continued to fight.

Even when the immovable Effie was pushed back and forced to rejoin the formation, he still remained just where he was, performing his

brutal dance of death. Even when relentless Soul Reaper cursed through gritted teeth and retreated, he continued to kill. Even when nimble Kai soared high into the sky, dismissing his sword to summon a bow, he still refused to take a step back.

In the end, there were just the two of them left in front of the formation — Sunny and Nephis. One was like an angel surrounded by white radiance and light, the other like a demon shrouded in darkness and shadows.

Both fought with cold, ruthless, unflinching resolve to obliterate the enemy at any cost… it was almost as if they were competing to see who could slay more.

Sunny did his damnedest to be the one to win that competition.

At some point, fighting an especially powerful abomination, he felt the shadow shell start to come undone. Without hesitation, Sunny dismissed the Mantle and summoned back the Graceless Dusk. Then, he allowed the form of the shadowspawn to dissipate and lunged from its crumbling carapace at the enemy.

The Sin of Solace flashed, and at the same time, the scorpion tail of the Nightmare Creature shot forward. It pierced the impervious silk of his tunic, and his stonelike skin, as well, plunging deep into his flesh.

Grimacing, Sunny beheaded the mantichora, then pushed himself off its harrowing sting and used the fully charged Dying Wish to heal his wounds.

Then, as if nothing had happened, he continued to kill.

He had grown weaker without the support of the shadow fiend shell, but also nimbler and much harder to pin down. His jade sword never stopped reaping lives.

Now that Sunny was wearing the Graceless Dusk again, though, there were a few more things he could do.

Glancing in the direction where Nightmare Creature seemed to disappear into white radiance one after another, without a trace,

Sunny hesitated for a moment, and then activated the Blessing of Dusk.

And then said in relaxed, leisurely tone:

[Hey, Neph… how's it going?]

Chapter-1116: Placid Whisper

There were a few moments of silence. In these moments, Sunny managed to dodge a spiked tentacle, slice through it with his sword, grab the bleeding stump, and toss the slithering creature over his head, impaling it on the horns of a different abomination. Then, he sidestepped the charging beast and cut through its legs, causing it to topple to the ground.

A third strike of the Sin of Solace finished both creatures off.

That was when Neph's response finally arrived:

[...It's a bit distracting, you know, to have someone speak in your head all of a sudden.]

Sunny grinned.

The connection the Blessing of Dusk established was a mental one, so it was not exactly like hearing her voice. Nevertheless, Changing Star's… thoughts… sounded a bit strained.

[You didn't answer my question.]

Now that Sunny lost the protection of the shadow fiend shell and retracted the Mantle back into his skin, he had to be more careful. Receiving direct blows was not out of the question, but it could throw him off balance. He had to use the [Feather of Truth] judiciously to account for the difference in mass between him and the opponents.

…And, of course, being struck by anything Corrupted could end in disaster.

Something flashed from the direction where Nephis was fighting, and a moment later, her voice resounded in his head:

[As expected, I guess. But, Sunny… what has gotten into you? You don't… don't seem like yourself today.]

'Ah, so she noticed…'

His grin widened.

A dozen or so meters to his left, the air rippled slightly. A chameleon-like creature was moving there, unseen… if not for the subtle fluctuation of the shadows, he would have never noticed it. The abomination had already moved past Sunny, swiftly approaching the Awakened soldiers behind him.

Which was not good — since it had enough presence of mind to ignore the pull of the Dying Wish, the chameleon had to be at least a Demon, and a strong one at that.

Sunny twisted his torso and tossed the Sin of Solace into the air.

The soldiers were all busy desperately resisting the flood of Nightmare Creatures, but they could not help but take glances at the spectacularly brutal slaughter that was taking place in front of them. Those who knew Sunny were all surprised and a little startled. Those who did not were chilled to the bone and in awe of his vicious lethality.

Which was why many people noticed the jade sword seemingly slipping out of his hand. Their eyes widened.

The Sin of Solace spun as it flew away… and then stopped abruptly, floating above ground. A stream of blood suddenly flowed out of thin air, and then, a revolting reptilian creature was suddenly there, its chest pierced by the white sword. The creature swayed and fell down.

The soldiers paled. The demon was mere steps away from reaching the formation.

Before the chameleon could stand up or crawl forward, several spears pierced its flesh, killing it.

As for Sunny… he was already busy fighting another abomination. Sin of Solace dissipated, so that he could summon it back.

[Don't seem like myself? Well… I did have many new and exciting experiences in the Antarctic Center, so I was bound to change a little. Don't mind it, though. I'm just performing in front of your sister. And speaking of your sister…]

He counted the seconds until the jade jian returned, dodging a flurry of blows like a slippery eel.

[Is she trying to get rid of you, or what? Surely, you've noticed that the reinforcements that were supposed to replace us are nowhere to be seen. If this continues, we will have to retreat… or die. Wait, it's not some sort of stupid test, is it? A true daughter of Valor will never surrender to the Nightmare Creatures, or some such crap?]

Nephis lingered for a moment.

[No… I don't know what she is doing. There must be a reason, but it is hard to say. Perhaps it has to do with putting pressure on Seishan to reveal some of what her Handmaidens are capable of. Perhaps there's something else.]

Sunny grimaced.

[You're awfully calm, considering the situation.]

He saw her through the gaps between the rushing Nightmare Creatures. Neph had summoned her helmet, brilliant white radiance shining through the slit of its visor and the seams of the graceful armor. It was as though there was nothing beneath its black steel but pure light.

Sunny could not see her face, but he knew how much pain fighting like this, for that long, was causing her.

Nephis was most likely approaching her limits, too.

[Do I… seem calm?]

He finally felt the slight weight of the Sin of Solace in his hand. Shifting his stance, Sunny immediately switched from being evasive to being ruthlessly lethal.

[Don't you know? You always seem calm.]

He killed the abomination that was trying to crush him with a stone hammer by severing both of its arms and its head, then added:

[Should we go all out?]

Each of them was holding something back. They could reveal their full power to save their lives…

But it would only save them once.

Nephis answered after a long second of silence.

[No. Trust in Cassie. If she chose to put us here, there must be a reason.]

Sunny smiled.

Her thinking was very similar to his own.

But trusting someone was not easy for him. Trusting Cassie and trusting in Cassie… those were different things, and neither of them was simple.

'Well, what the hell is her reason?'

He would have loved to ponder that question more, but at that moment, a deafening shriek suddenly shook the world.

Sunny was rather proud of the battle roar he had produced earlier with the help of the Extraordinary Rock, but compared to this sky-splitting wail, it seemed like a placid whisper.

Looking up, he saw…

An enormous scaled beast plummeting from a whirlwind of crows, its body wreathed in arcs of searing lightning. One of the rotting wings of the flying horror had been completely torn off, a river of vile miasma flowing from the terrible wound like a waterfall of corruption.

It seemed that Sky Tide and Wake of Ruin were the first to overcome their opponent.

The problem was…

Sunny's eyes widened.

That the wounded titan looked like he was falling... directly on his head.

Chapter-1117: Fell Titan

'Well… that's new…'

Sunny had lived through many unthinkable disasters, managing to survive in the most dire and seemingly inescapable situations. The improbable tales of his close brushes with death could probably fill a book.

However, he had definitely never had a titan fall on his head.

'What the hell is this?!'

The great scaled beast was plummeting to the ground, its body riddled with terrible wounds. One of its three long necks was severed, the other hung lifelessly, held by only a few threads of flesh. Of its wings, only one remained. A cloud of vile miasma trailed behind it like a harrowing cloak.

The creature was maybe two dozen seconds away from crashing into the ground.

Sunny froze for a moment, stunned by the frightening visage of the titan that had been cast down from the skies. He wasn't the only one — Nephis was looking up, too, and so were the soldiers. Even the Nightmare Creatures halted, raising their bestial heads to witness the fall of one of their lords.

'Not good.'

Neph was the first to react. Her voice rolled across the battlefield, pulling the Awakened out of their shocked inaction.

"Pull back! Fighting Retreat! Move if you want to live!"

At the same time, she sent Sunny a mental message:

[Sunny… I am going to stall the horde to cover the retreat. You... you do as you wish.]

The meaning of her words was clear. What Neph meant to say was…

Help me.

But due to the nature of their bond, she couldn't. Because that would be an order.

Sunny hesitated.

Behind him, every second Awakened turned around and dashed back. Those who remained doubled their efforts to resist the flood of abominations, who had already recovered from their momentary passivity.

Once the soldiers who fell back ran for a few seconds, they turned around and assembled into a loose line. Then, it was the turn of those who had stayed behind to retreat. Like that, alternating between running and fighting, the Fire Keepers, the Wolves, and the Nightsingers started to move away from the perceived impact zone.

Of course, such a maneuver was perilous and had the potential to result in many casualties. Every time you turned your back on the enemy in a battle, you were risking your life, after all. But with the help of the experienced Fire Keepers and the three Masters who had joined the formation, the soldiers managed to preserve their lives through the hasty retreat.

Changing Star, meanwhile, moved forward. The ring of flame that raged around her changed, growing narrower. A few moments later, the fire seemed to be absorbed into her radiant figure. Clad in black armor and wreathed in blinding white flames, Nephis took a second step.

Sunny sighed.

'Do as I wish, huh?'

What he wished to do today was make a suitable kind of impression. And the impression he was going for was that of someone who would

never retreat from a trivial nuisance like a plummeting titan.

Opening the gate of the Shadow Lantern, he called forth all the shadows that were stored inside, and sent them forth.

In front of Sunny, a wall of shadows suddenly rose from the ground, blocking off a wide swath of the battlefield. The tide of Nightmare Creatures was momentarily stemmed.

At the same time, far to his left, Nephis unleashed her flames. The wrought fire that she had wrapped tightly around her armor and compressed into a furious mass of incinerating white radiance was suddenly devoid of the pressure of her control. It furiously exploded forward.

A deafening explosion rang out, and a crudely directed wave of white flame rolled from her staggering figure in a wide fan. It swallowed many ranks of Nightmare Creatures — some were torn to tiny pieces and turned to ash, crumbling into nothingness, some survived, receiving terrible and debilitating burns.

Together, Sunny and Nephis had managed to build a temporary dam that blocked the path of the abominations — half of the dam was the wall of shadows, the other was the wave of flames.

Of course, that dam would not last long, and both of them had spent the lion's share of their remaining essence to produce this wide-scale effect. The wall was already cracking, and the wave was already dying down.

But it was enough to buy the soldiers time to retreat.

And before their dam fully collapsed, the shadow of the falling colossus covered the ground.

'Crap…'

Sunny felt the impact of the massive body before his vision registered it — that was because he suddenly found himself flying, the ground disappearing from beneath his feet.

As a violent tremor traveled through the battlefield, splitting the

ground apart, he hit the dirt and rolled, sensing his skin burn. Sunny could feel a powerful gale assault him with furious force, but he was blinded by the cloud of the vile miasma that had covered everything around.

He realized that it was Sky Tide pushing the noxious cloud away from the army's formation. However, Sunny was too deep into the miasma. Even though he had stopped breathing and closed his eyes, he could still feel the deadly poison seep into his skin.

Marble Shell and Blood Weave were preventing his flesh from rotting and dissolving… for now. He did not know how long his defenses would last, though. The miasma flowing from within the body of the scaled beast was much more virulent and powerful than any toxin he had encountered before.

'...That's just great.'

Sunny summoned the Essence Pearl. As soon as the Memory manifested itself, he placed it in his mouth, regaining the ability to breathe without inhaling deadly poison. He still hesitated to open his eyes, though, perceiving the world through the shapes and movements of shadows.

The shadows were a mess. It was hard to tell what exactly was going on around him… all he could feel was a sea of Nightmare Creatures wailing in agony as their bodies were being dissolved by the miasma.

Chapter-1118: Pure Chance

It was sort of ingenious, actually. By controlling the wind to blow the cloud away from the human formation, Saint Tyris was pushing it into the horde of abominations. It did not matter that the titan had been on their side — the Nightmare Creatures plunged into the miasma were doomed to be destroyed, just like humans would.

The devastation was so thorough that, in this section of the battlefield, the pressure on the defensive line of Awakened had drastically lessened. Nothing would be able to pass through the breach now.

So, that problem was solved.

The problem that remained was that Sunny and Nephis had found themselves within the cloud of miasma. Changing Star could probably burn the poison away with her flames, but he was having a very unpleasant time.

'Argh, damn it. Escape… I need to escape back to where the Fire Keepers had retreated.'

But Sunny was all turned around because of the earthquake from the titan's fall.

Where to go?

He gritted his teeth, then ordered two of the shadows to slip off his body and dash away in two different directions. With some luck, one of them would leave the noxious cloud and show him the way.

Before that happened, however…

'Ah, crap.'

Sunny felt a massive shadow lunging at him from somewhere unseen. He blindly slashed with the Sin of Solace, feeling the jade blade bite into something extremely tough, then sink into something soft. Then, something hard crashed into him, and he was sent flying for a second time in the last minute.

This time, Sunny fell on a pile of abomination corpses. He felt sharp spikes and scales scrape against the silk of the Graceless Dusk and rolled down, tracking the movements of the massive shadow. What the hell was it? It didn't seem to have legs, or arms, simply floating above the ground.

One thing was certain, though… the thing, whatever it was, was not feeling swell. Its movements were chaotic and resembled convulsions. Even without the deathly miasma and the strike delivered by Sunny, the creature was in a sorry state.

He still refused to open his eyes, though.

If he did, however… he would have seen a ghastly head swaying above the ground. It was held up by a long neck that arched up and disappeared into the haze of the miasma. The head was covered by tough scales, and had the hilt of the Sin of Solace protruding from a crack in its skull.

The head swayed madly, opening its maw, and shot forward in a frenzied desire to swallow Sunny. But before it could, the long neck convulsed one last time, and the demented light slowly disappeared from the frenzied eyes of the creature.

The head slammed into the ground a few meters away from him and grew still.

As for Sunny…

He suddenly heard the voice of the Spell whisper into his ears.

The Spell said:

[You have slain a Fallen Titan, Defiled Seeker of Truth.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[...You have received a Memory.]

He froze.

'Wha…'

Then, Sunny almost spat out the Essence Pearl.

'What just happened?!'

When did he kill a titan? He did no such thing!

Sunny's shock was so great that he even forgot about the cloud of miasma eating at his skin for a moment.

Slowly, he understood the sequence of what had transpired. The scaled beast had fallen somewhere ahead, inside the horde of abominations. The tremor produced by the impact must have thrown Sunny closer to the titan.

The creature had already been on the verge of death when he accidentally stumbled on its last head. That was the massive shadow that had suddenly lunged at him… and he struck it with the Sin of Solace, delivering the finishing blow through pure chance.

Sunny would have laughed if not for the need to keep his mouth shut. He shook his head in disbelief.

'Ah… this is… a bit awkward, isn't it?'

That was the second kill he had stolen from Saint Tyris. Was it her fate, to deliver Sunny powerful Nightmare Creatures to slaughter? First the Remnant of the Jade Queen, now the Defiled Seeker of Truth…

'Well, I'm sure that Sky Tide is above being petty about such stuff. Plus, she doesn't need to know that it was me… there's a sea of abominations here. Any of them could have delivered that last strike. Nightmare Creatures are known to devour their own, after all!'

Still… that was the second titan Sunny had killed. If not for the fact that both of the kills were somewhat murky, he would be going

around demanding that people call him the Titan Slayer.

The sails of the Brilliant Emporium would definitely skyrocket if its proprietor had such an illustrious title.

He shook his head again, then stood up. First, he had to escape the damned miasma.

'I must have hit my head when I fell…'

One of his shadows had just discovered the correct path, but Sunny belatedly realized that he could have just moved in the direction opposite of where the wind was blowing. Saint Tyris was pushing the cloud away from the human formation, after all, so that was where the formation had to be.

As he made the first step, the burning sensation gnawing at his skin suddenly disappeared, replaced by searing, but pleasant heat. Then, Sunny was surrounded by bright light.

He opened his eyes at the same moment as a strong hand gripped his shoulder.

Nephis was standing by his side, both of them surrounded by a whirlwind of flame. The fire burned away the miasma, creating a pocket of clean, if somewhat thin, air.

"Are you alright?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then nodded and smiled crookedly.

"Better than ever."

Hearing her actual voice was unexpectedly nice.

"Good. Then let's get out of here."

Neph threw a glance at the head of the titan that lay on the ground a few meters away from them, the harrowing maw opened in an eternal, silent scream. Then, without saying anything, she pulled Sunny away.

He followed.

'Yes… getting the hell out of here sounds like a great plan…'

Chapter-1119: Chain Reaction

By the time Sunny and Nephis escaped from the noxious cloud, the situation on the battlefield had changed.

The Wolves, the Nightsingers, and the Fire Keepers were cut off from the Nightmare Creatures by the deathly miasma, so they received a few moments of respite. The poison itself, meanwhile, was blown into the depths of the horde by Sky Tide's winds, wreaking havoc among the abominations.

Suddenly, the pressure on the center of the army formation lessened.

The fighting on the flanks, however, only grew more furious.

Sunny reached the line of soldiers, passed between the forward fighters, and plopped down on the ground, breathing heavily. Nephis was in no better state than him — worse, actually. The pain of having to use her Abilities for so long had taken a toll on her.

She lowered herself to the ground near him, staring at the mud with distant eyes. The Awakened met their return with wide smiles, faces shining with relief and triumph. Seeing that the two Masters were exhausted and needed to catch their breaths, they closed ranks around them and prepared their weapons, watching the hazy wall of swirling miasma with cold focus.

If something suddenly lunged at the formation from the poisonous haze, the soldiers were prepared to meet it with sharp blades.

Sunny slowly exhaled, returning from the rampant state of battle frenzy.

Then, he looked up.

The fall of one of the titans was a great victory in and of itself.

However, it had meaning far beyond the death of a powerful abomination…

Much more important was the fact that the death of the winged horror would inevitably cause a cascade of meaningful consequences. In fact, the chain reaction was already beginning.

Now that Wake of Ruin and Sky Tide were free, each of them moved to provide support in other spots of the battlefield. The steel-winged bird of prey fell like a sword of heavens, obliterating a vast swath of crawling vines that Summer Knight, Dire Fang, and Silent Stalker were fighting against.

The vast murder of crows, meanwhile, descended on the horde itself. Saint Cor's strongest suit had never been facing a single, overwhelmingly powerful adversary — in the battle against the winged titan, he could only provide support to Tyris.

Now that he was unleashed on a large number of weaker targets, however, Wake of Ruin was finally able to showcase his full, dreadful might.

A myriad of crows lunged at the abominations from the dark skies, tearing into them with sharp talons and even sharper beaks. If those were ordinary carrion birds, they would not have been able to do much damage to the monstrous creatures… however, they were not. Each of the crows was a manifestation of a Transcendent, and so, they easily slaughtered Awakened and Fallen monstrosities.

They assaulted the Corrupted abominations, too. If one crow was not enough, ten would gather to riddle the creature with ghastly wounds. If ten was not enough, a hundred would descend on the monster like a hungry cloud.

The furious massacre that had taken place was grisly and spectacular.

And, just like that, the scales of the battle started to shift.

With Wake of Ruin helping lessen the burden of the Awakened soldiers, the army formation regained its vigor, and even started pushing the horde back. Soon after, a second titan was slain, the

forest of vines growing still and brittle.

Once the vine creature died, the fate of the remaining two titans was sealed. The appalling mountain of flesh and the ghostly apparition were felled in short succession, letting every Saint turn their attention to the horde.

Even then, the outcome of the battle was not yet decided. The advantage was on the side of the humans, but even with the Transcendent joining the fight against the sea of Nightmare Creatures…

The Saints were all tired and spent after their clash with the titans, and the number of abominations was simply too great. There remained truly powerful creatures among them, as well… tyrants, devils, and demons of all kinds.

Additionally, Nightmare Creatures were not humans, or even sane in any definition of the word. An ordinary enemy would have had their morale broken and fled after sustaining terrible losses and watching four mighty titans, the driving force of the horde, fall. But abominations knew no retreat. Even while dying, they only wanted to rip the humans apart.

Only total annihilation would lead to their defeat.

…And so, that was what humans did.

Guided by Morgan, the army stood its ground and slaughtered the Nightmare Creatures, until there were none left.

A sea of abominations turned into a sea of corpses. The ghastly carpet of monstrous bodies covered the plain, stretching far into the distance. Countless crows filled the sky, and the ground had turned into wet sludge after absorbing rivers of blood. The stench of it all was almost unbearable.

And yet, it was the most glorious thing Sunny had even seen.

Staring at the grand battlefield, he couldn't quite believe what he saw. The scale of the battle they had just won was simply too unbelievable. Even after witnessing massive sieges in the Antarctica

Center, Sunny was unprepared to witness something like this.

This time, the humans were not defending, stalling for time while the civilians evacuated. This time, they had gone on the offensive, venturing into the wilderness to slay the titans and the horde the four creatures had caused to assemble.

They even succeeded.

Despite the fact that the Evacuation Army had achieved many of it goals in the Southern Quadrant, and continued following the plan… this felt like the first true victory Sunny had witnessed since the start of the Chain of Nightmares.

And he played a substantial role in achieving it.

Sunny studied the changed landscape of the plain with a slightly startled expression. Then, a frown slowly appeared on his face.

'What happens next, then?'

Right now, all seven Saints were gathered in one spot. Soon, they would depart for their siege capitals.

Wouldn't that be a perfect opportunity for the great clans to show their fangs?

Suddenly grim, Sunny shook his head and turned around, throwing a glance at the tired soldiers around him.

'...One step at a time.'

Chapter-1120: Performance Review

The divergence from the norm continued after the fighting was over, as well. Usually, the human forces would be hastily retreating from the site of the battle to escape the converging abominations that had been attracted by the noise and the smell of blood...

However, the joint army defiantly stayed in place. A field camp was established, surrounded by hastily constructed fortifications. Teams of salvagers prowled the vast battlefield, retrieving soul shards and dismantling the bodies of the most powerful Nightmare Creatures for precious materials.

It was as if the leaders of the expedition force were not at all concerned by the threat of the migrating hordes. On the contrary, they seem to welcome the danger.

The joint army had been assembled to destroy the titans and reduce the accumulation of Nightmare Creatures in the area before the siege capitals could be compromised. Both of these objectives had been achieved, but the Saints decided to cull more abominations while they had a chance — no one knew when Valor, Song, and the government would join forces again.

The fighting on the fringes of the camp would most likely continue through the rest of the day and the entire night, with several smaller hordes being ground against the bulwark of the seven Saints and their soldiers.

None of that concerned Sunny, though. For now, he could just rest.

The Fire Keepers, the Wolves, and the Nightsingers had ended the battle together, so they were assigned the same spot inside the camp. Despite how fierce the fighting had been, casualties were few — none

among the survivors of the Forgotten Shore, and a mere handful in the two companies led by Effie and Kai.

That was mostly thanks to the five Masters who had shielded the Awakened soldiers from the worst of what the titanic horde had to offer.

So, the mood inside their section of the camp was more festive than grave.

As Sunny walked through the rows of tents toward a supply vehicle where food was being prepared, he received many reactions.

"Look! It's him!"

"Gods almighty… when Master Sunless lured that Tyrant to the river, I knew that he was good. But I thought that he was just an extremely competent scout, you know? Who knew that we had such a monster with us this whole time…"

"A monster? More like a Devil! Damn, now I know where that nickname comes from. He has to be one of the scariest Ascended in the Quadrant, right? No — in the whole world."

"Why are you guys so surprised? Master Sunless is from Changing Star's cohort, like our Wolfie. Of course he's just as crazy as her…"

"I think I'm going to have a dream about him today. I just don't know if it'll be a nightmare or, you know… a different kind of dream…"

"Are you so smitten that you've lost what little brain you used to have, fool? You're an Awakened! You don't dream."

"Ah, yes… what a pity… relief, I mean relief!"

Sunny was slightly amused by that last one, but he did not let it show.

It seemed that his little performance had worked… at least on these ordinary soldiers. What effect it had on the intended targets — Morgan, Seishan, and by extension the forces of the great clans on the continent — remained to be seen.

He got a generous portion of army stew and made his way to the tent where the other four Masters were gathered.

The atmosphere inside was relaxed, but none of them had dismissed their armor. Even though the situation seemed to be under control, and the Saints appeared confident in their ability to protect the camp, one could never know what would happen when the Spell was involved. So, experienced fighters like them never allowed themselves to completely lower their guards.

Kai was absent-mindedly cleaning his face with a wet towel, Nephis was sitting tiredly on a cot, Jet was stretched on another one with a blissful expression on her face, and Effie… of course, Effie was wolfing down an unreasonable amount of food.

When she saw him, however, she forced herself to pause for a moment. The huntress stared at Sunny with wide eyes.

"Sunny… what the hell was that?! You just… boom! And went berserk! It was actually sort of spectacular."

Effie paused for a moment, and then added with a glint in her eyes:

"And since when can you turn into that shadow fiend?! Have you Transcended? Are you secretly a Saint now? No, that can't be right… can it?"

He endured the deluge of questions, then coughed.

"It's just a trick I picked up in the Antarctic Center. A special application of my Ascended Ability."

Effie remained silent for a few moments, then shook her head.

"You are scary. Let's be friends!"

...Then, she added with a grin:

"Oh… and try making that shadow fiend bigger, next time. Looking at it made me really want to ride you again…"

As a strange expression appeared on Jet's face, the huntress started

giggling and stuffed a spoonful of stew into her mouth.

Sunny shook his head in resignation.

"Don't mind her. The fiend was actually my body in the Nightmare. While that… overgrown delinquent… was sent into the body of a small child. So I let her ride on my shoulders, to save time. In retrospect, that was a huge mistake."

Jet smiled at him lazily from her cot.

"You don't really have to explain, you know?"

Sunny briefly glanced at Neph and rolled his eyes.

"I know. I still want to, though!"

Soul Reaper chuckled.

"I see. Well, in any case… good job today. As for what Sunny did and the reputation he earned…"

She looked at Kai, Effie, and Nephis with a shrug.

"That's just how it goes. In the Antarctic Center, everyone knew how fierce of a fighter he is. Now, people in East Antarctica will know, too."

Kai lingered for a bit, then said:

"We all know it as well, of course. More than anyone. It's just that… Sunny, you usually shy away from the spotlight. Seeing you acting out of character is a little strange. Is everything alright?"

Sunny sent his friend a reassuring smile and nodded.

"Sure. I shied away from the spotlight because it was convenient, and now I don't… because it's more convenient. So, don't worry."

Then, he looked at Nephis and raised an eyebrow:

"And what about you? No comment?"

She turned her head and studied him for a few moments.

Eventually, Neph looked away and said simply:

"...Your swordsmanship has improved."

And that was it.

Sunny opened his mouth to respond, but then grew silent. A slight frown appeared on his face.

With a sigh, he found himself a seat and concentrated on the food.

That was because the shadow he had left outside the tent noticed someone heading their way...

Black armor, red cape, vermilion eyes that were sharp enough to cut steel.

Morgan was coming to pay them a visit.

Chapter-1121: Deluge of Compliments

Sunny settled in a corner and stuffed his mouth with stew. A few moments later, the flap of the tent opened, and Morgan walked in, followed closely by Cassie.

The Princess of Valor seemed to be in a good mood. Her strange vermilion eyes were lively and vivid, shining with barely contained excitement. It was as though the calamitous battle had invigorated the usually restrained young woman, revealing a glimpse of her true self.

Without the habitual mask of composed decorum, Morgan looked… younger.

Her words echoed Sunny's thoughts. A pleasant — and disturbingly familiar — smile appeared on her beautiful face, and with a melodious laugh, Morgan said:

"That was spectacular! Dear sister, venerable Masters… you did not disappoint!"

With that, her lips twisted a little in an expression of wistful regret. She seemed disappointed by the fact that she had not received a chance to participate in the battle personally.

Morgan sighed.

"The whole camp is aflame with the tales of what happened in your corner of the battlefield. Even the feats performed by the Saints seem to have taken a back seat to what Changing Star has achieved. Ah… I'm so proud of my talented, capable little sister. Nicely done!"

She paused for a moment, and then added with a smile that seemed a

little sharper than before:

"Your glory is clan Valor's glory, of course. So, I am very happy right now."

Sunny silently chewed his food. Hearing the word "glory" from a descendant of War God really rubbed him the wrong way, but he didn't let it ruin his appetite.

'Indeed, she has a good reason to be happy…'

If the war of the great clans was a popularity contest — which it was, in a sense — then Valor was currently winning. Not only had Sky Tide been the first of the Saints to slay her foe, but the potentially catastrophic breach in the defensive formation had also been repaired by Nephis.

'Was that why Morgan failed to send us reinforcements? To earn her damned clan some glory?'

Sunny frowned. That was a possibility, but a small one. Anvil's daughter was not someone who would sacrifice strategic benefits to earn a little bit of fame… especially because clan Valor already had too much of it.

So, he simply glanced at Morgan and asked:

"By the way, what happened to those reinforcements we were supposed to receive?"

Not looking particularly guilty or taken aback by his bluntness, she shrugged.

"It didn't look like you needed any, so I sent them someplace else."

Sunny wanted to rebuke her, but then changed his mind and turned his attention back to the stew.

They had indeed managed to hold out by themselves, in the end. The perspective of the people directly participating in the bloodshed was, naturally, limited. Morgan, on the other hand, had enjoyed the broad view of the whole battlefield, especially because of Cassie. She must

have known that Saint Tyris had been close to defeating the Defiled Seeker of Truth…

In fact, Morgan might have been the one to coordinate with Sky Tide and make sure that the titan fell in front of the breach, sealing it with the cloud of lethal miasma.

So, while it seemed as though the Fire Keepers had been left for dead from Sunny's perspective, she really could have had no reason to send reinforcements their way.

'I'm not sure that I'm buying it… but on the other hand, I'm also not sure that I'm not buying it.'

His thoughts were interrupted by the fact that Morgan was staring at him intently.

Sunny shifted.

"Uh… what?"

Her smile grew wider.

"My dear sister fought admirably… but I expected nothing less from a daughter of Valor. You, however! Master Sunless, you gave me a very, very pleasant surprise. It seems that the reports I've read about you were not nearly detailed enough."

She took a step closer and leaned forward, staring at him with something that almost resembled hunger.

"To be honest, I never understood what my little sister saw in you. But now! I take it all back. She has a good eye. You fought beautifully, Master Sunless… we really should spar sometime. I have not had a good sparring partner in a long, long time.

My dear sister indulged me at first, but now, she is always busy."

Neph's mouth twitched a little. Sunny, meanwhile, shivered under Morgan's burning gaze.

'Right… I forgot. She's a complete battle maniac.'

He coughed awkwardly.

"Sure. Why not? A friendly spar sounds like a good idea. Oh, but I mostly fight Nightmare Creatures, so my habits are a bit… rough. So do tell me if I get carried away."

Morgan's eyes gleamed with a dangerous light.

"That won't be a problem. I tend to get carried away myself, sometimes. That's why it's hard to find suitable sparring partners… most people are so brittle, you know?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Can't say that I do."

He was definitely not brittle, so there was no reason to be concerned. A spar was just a spar, after all.

…So why was he suddenly feeling cold? As if he had just gotten himself into a really, really sticky situation.

Morgan lingered for a few moments, staring at him with gleaming eyes, then shook her head.

"Sadly, our spar will have to wait until we return to the siege capital. And about that… sister, might I have a word? There are things we must discuss."

Nephis nodded, then rose from her seat and followed Morgan out of the tent. Soon, there were only five people inside once again — Cassie stayed behind, sitting quietly in a corner.

Sunny finished his stew and asked her in a low tone:

"What is that about?"

The blind girl hesitated for a moment.

"They need to plan a route to the siege capital. The way back is shaping up to be… perilous. For a few reasons."

He nodded, understanding the underlying message.

Then, Sunny gave Cassie a complicated look.

When things seemed especially dark during the battle, Neph had told him to trust in the blind girl. So, what had been Cassie's intent in placing them there? Had she simply known that the Fire Keepers would not end up stranded in the sea of Nightmare Creatures?

Or had she known more? For example, that Sunny would deliver the fatal blow to the wounded titan if put in that particular spot of the battlefield…

And speaking of the dead titan. There was a Memory that Sunny had yet to take a look at.

'An Ascended Memory of the Seventh Tier…'

Putting his plate away, Sunny found a cot, stretched his tired body on it, and closed his eyes.

Then, he dove into the Soul Sea.

Chapter-1122: Mirror of Truth

Walking past the legion of silent shadows to stand between the five dark suns of his lightless soul, Sunny summoned the Memory forth. Soon, a round hand mirror of dark silver appeared in the air in front of him. Its front looked like a pool of still mercury, while its back was decorated with beautiful engravings.

Sunny saw his pale reflection in the silver mirror, and suddenly felt an eerie chill creep up his spine.

That Memory... gave him a very ominous feeling.

When he took the mirror, it felt strangely heavy in his hand.

'Not a weapon, and not an armor. A tool, then? Or a charm?'

He hesitated for a moment, and summoned the runes.

Strings of shimmering symbols appeared in the air, surrounding the hand mirror. He read them, frowning slightly.

Memory: [Mirror of Truth].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: Seven.

Memory Type: Tool.

The first four strings held no surprises. The next few, however…

Sunny's eyes widened slightly.

'What… why is that name here?'

The first word in the description of the Mirror of Truth was not one

that he had expected to see today, but one that he knew all too well.

That word was…

Weaver.

Sunny glanced at the hand mirror with a tense expression, a deep scowl appearing on his face. Then, he slowly turned back to the runes and continued to study them.

Since the start of the Antarctica campaign, he had often encountered hints and mentions of Ariel, the Demon of Dread. So why did Weaver's name suddenly show up in the runes of a Memory?

There was only one way to find out.

The description read:

Memory Description: [Weaver was known as the master of lies, while Ariel was known as the keeper of truths. The two were not close and rarely met, which was why Ariel was surprised to find Weaver staring at his pyramid one day.

"Isn't it beautiful, this tomb of mine? Have you come to admire it?" Ariel said.

After a moment of silence, Weaver responded.

"I have not known that you've built a tomb, nor have I ever seen it. How would I know to admire it? I just happened to be here by chance. Now that I've seen it, my heart is untouched. I feel nothing."

Then, Weaver asked.

"But you seem to feel too much, Demon of Dread. Your face is unsightly. You are smiling, but there are tears streaming from your eyes. Why?"

Ariel laughed, "I'm not sure."

He laughed and cried as he looked at the tomb, saying, "I built it to bury the truth. Truth is the most hideous thing in the world, Weaver,

and knowing it is a cruel torment. I mean to bury the truths that I cannot endure at the heart of this tomb, and be free of them forever."

Weaver remained silent.

After a while, Weaver spoke.

"It seems to me that you already did. And you already are."

With that, the Demon of Fate turned and walked away without looking back.

Walking away, Weaver whispered.

"...You wanted to be free of the truth, so you didn't deserve it."]

Just like Weaver in the description, Sunny remained silent for a long time.

'Wait… the Tomb of Ariel is not the burial place of Ariel, the Demon of Dread? Instead, it's the tomb that he built?'

That information alone was worth a lot. However, there was so much more in that strangely verbose description. Like the fact that Ariel had apparently constructed the black pyramid to hide ugly truths from existence… or rather, those truths that he could not bear to know.

Wouldn't that mean that the clan… or person… to conquer the pyramid would learn all those secrets?

But even more than that, Weaver's appearance in the description of the [Mirror of Truth] was itself very interesting.

Sunny remembered the exact words:

'I have not known that you've built a tomb, nor have I ever seen it. How would I know to admire it? I just happened to be here by chance. Now that I've seen it, my heart is untouched. I feel nothing.'

Since Weaver had just been called the master of lies in the previous string of runes, wouldn't it mean that Sunny should take these words

with a grain of salt? So the Demon of Fate had actually known of the existence of the tomb, had seen it before, had come to look at it again on purpose, and had felt a great deal of things as a result.

Maybe.

Sunny thought about it for a while, then shook his head.

'I'll probably only know if I actually look at it myself.'

With that, he shifted his gaze and glanced at the runes describing the enchantments of the [Mirror of Truth].

…Or rather, an enchantment. There was only one.

By now, Sunny knew that more powerful enchantments demanded more space within the weave. Which meant that for a Memory of the Seventh Tier to possess a single enchantment, that enchantment had to be a really powerful one.

He read the runes:

Memory Enchantments: [Searching Reflection].

Enchantment Description: [Catch the visage of a being into the Mirror of Truth. Activate the enchantment to destroy the mirror and gain one power of the reflected being for a period of time that depends on its potency.]

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Wha…'

His hand trembled.

Wouldn't… wouldn't that make him…

A discount Mordret?

"What the hell?"

He stared at the mirror, not knowing how to feel.

On one hand, being able to steal an ability of any being — be it a human or a Nightmare Creature — was crazy!

One the other hand, the [Mirror of Truth] would be destroyed in the process, and the stolen ability would only persist for a period of time. Which was still incredible…

But damned Prince of Nothing could do it any time he wanted, for as much time as he needed!

Sunny shook his head.

'No, this is an amazing Memory. It's just that Mordret is seriously broken. And… and he is even seems to be immortal, to boot! Where's justice in that?!'

Grimacing, he left the Soul Sea and opened his eyes, staring silently at the roof of the tent. His mood was not great.

…It did not remain foul for a while, though.

That was because after a few minutes of sulking, Sunny couldn't help but start thinking about whose Ability he could steal.

Nephis had really outstanding Abilities… except for her Ascended one, which was rather strange and all but useless. Cassie had great ones, too.

But why settle for those? What about Whispering Blade and Beastmaster? A Transformation Ability of a Saint in his hands… that would be a fun trump card to have!

Hell, he did not even have to limit himself to Saints. There was a Corrupted Titan somewhere in East Antarctica. There was the Winter Beast, too…

Sunny did not notice as a smile appeared on his face.

And so, he fell asleep, smiling.

His last thought was:

'Not bad for a day's work...'

Chapter-1123: Solace of Oblivion

Sunny had been really exhausted after the long battle. However, due to the [Blessing of Spirit] and the [Blessing of Flesh] enchantments of the Shroud of Dusk, he only needed a few short hours to recover from the heavy fatigue.

He woke up feeling rested and refreshed… but also strangely forlorn. Sunny had not dreamed in a long while, but tonight, he did. The dream had already disappeared from his memory, but the feeling of sorrow and loss remained, pressing at his heart.

He let out a sigh.

'I actually had a nightmare… wow. As if the waking world is not nightmarish enough, already.'

Sunny was in a subdued and contemplative mood. Before falling asleep, he had been thinking about how to use the enchantment of the Mirror of Truth. Now that he had woken up, however, he found his mind drifting to its description.

No matter how he looked at it, the conversation between Weaver and Ariel was really too strange. Especially the words Weaver had whispered at the end…

'You wanted to be free of the truth, so you didn't deserve it.'

Why would the Demon of Fate, who was known to weave countless lies, admonish Ariel for discarding the truth?

Unexpectedly, Sunny thought of the Sin of Solace. Not its enchantments, and not even its description, but the name of the cursed sword itself.

Why was solace a sin, exactly?

The description of the Shroud of Graceless Dusk spoke about how the sybils found salvation and solace within the Tomb of Ariel. However, in the end, they too were destroyed. Dusk had been the last of them.

The [Hideous Truth] enchantment of the Sin of Solace, meanwhile, was supposed to grant revelations to those who succumbed to madness. Revelations of truth, which Ariel had described as the most hideous thing in the world and the source of cruel torment.

So… wasn't Ariel himself the sinner, then? He had committed a sin by seeking solace in forgetting the truth.

Perhaps Weaver, as a masterful liar, knew the value of truth just as well as the Demon of Dread, and felt contempt for those who squandered it. Perhaps there was more to this story.

In any case…

Sunny turned slightly and glanced in the direction where Kai was sleeping restlessly.

He had never really considered his friend's Flaw a heavy one to carry. What was so terrible about knowing when people lied? However, with that knowledge came the knowledge of truth… Kai, just like Ariel, was cursed to learn many things that he would rather not know.

Would his friend also be forced to seek solace in oblivion one day?

Sunny raised his eyebrow.

'Oblivion, huh?'

That was another thing. There was the Demon of Oblivion, as well, although that one was hard to remember. Of all of the seven daemons, Oblivion was mentioned the least. In fact, Sunny would have never even known of his… hers… their existence if not for Noctis, who had mentioned the Demon of Oblivion once in passing, saying that their name was long forgotten.

Actually, just remembering the fact of Oblivion's existence was not easy.

Noctis, meanwhile, was the one who had helped the Sun Prince erase some memories. The eccentric sorcerer had been close to Aidre, the blessed of Heart God, who was the god of memory as well… was that why he could remember the Demon of Oblivion?

Shadow God, by coincidence, was the god of solace.

Sunny covered his face with a hand and suppressed a frustrated groan.

'Ah, what a mess.'

What was he thinking about?

'Uh... ah! Oblivion, I was thinking of the Demon of Oblivion.'

Noctis had helped Sun Prince erase a few important memories… but how, exactly, had Ariel retrieved the memories of truth out of his head and hid them in the heart of his tomb? Had he received help from someone, as well?

An easily forgotten sibling, perhaps? It was a bit suspicious that he had not known the source of his tears when speaking with Weaver.

Sunny was not sure, but he felt that there were actually not two, but three daemons somehow connected to the black pyramid — the Demon of Dread, the Demon of Fate, and the mysterious Demon of Oblivion.

His theory about the last one, however, was completely unsubstantiated. Maybe it was simply the result of him just dreaming about something he could not remember.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then summoned the Endless Spring and drank some water. After that, he silently sent his shadows out.

The emissaries of both Valor and Song were currently in the camp, so he could not pass up the opportunity to try and glean some of their

secrets.

As the shadows prowled the army camp, he thought about the [Searching Reflection] enchantment one more time and summoned his runes.

Sunny had not taken a good look at them in a while.

The shimmering symbols ignited in the air in front of him:

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Ascended.

Class: Tyrant.

Shadow Cores: [5/7].

Shadow Fragments: [503/5000].

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Extraordinary Rock], [Endless Spring], [Dark Wing], [Moonlight Shard], [Weaver's Mask], [Autumn Leaf], [Cruel Sight], [Covetous Coffer], [Heavenly Burden], [Memory of Fire], [Memory of Ice], [Strike of Thunder], [Morgan's Warbow], [Shadow Lantern], [Bone Singer], [Shadow Chair], [Overpriced Saddle], [Dying Wish], [Sin of Solace], [Bitter Cusp], [Stifled Scream], [Weaver's Needle], [Essence Pearl], [Nimble Catch], [Shroud of Graceless Dusk], [Mirror of Truth]...

There were several Memories apart from the [Mirror of Truth] that he had received during the last battle. Sunny studied them for a few moments, then decided that those would be best used as nourishment for Nightmare.

Satisfied, he continued to read the runes.

Echoes: —

Shadows: [Onyx Saint], [Soul Serpent], [Nightmare], [Ravenous

Fiend]

Attributes: [Fated], [Flame of Divinity], [Master of Shadows], [Blood Weave], [Bone Weave], [Marble Shell].

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Abilities: [Shadow Control], [Shadow Step], [Shadow Manifestation].

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

Flaw: [Clear Conscience].

Dream Anchor: Tower of Longing.

Sunny concentrated on his shadows.

Saint was at a respectable… zero shadow fragments out of three hundred. That was because he had concentrated on feeding his other Shadow after she Transcended — Nightmare was still a mere Awakened creature, so he could see a Rank evolution much sooner that way.

The black destrier was swiftly approaching that evolution. His runes showed:

Shadow Fragments: [179/300].

Nightmares Required: [734/1000].

Sunny thought for a few moments.

'Not bad.'

…Then, he did another thing that he had not done in a while.

He concentrated on his Innate Ability, and summoned Neph's runes.

Chapter-1124: Pure Soul

There had been a time when Sunny studied Changing Star's runes like a man obsessed. His whole life had been built around the desire to overtake her on the path to power.

He might have even done a few careless things in that pursuit.

At some point, however, Sunny had lost the desire to compare himself to Nephis, at least in this way. The first change had happened because of her return from the Dream Realm. The second… sometime in the Antarctic Center, he had lost the habit of summoning her runes every day.

Shadow fragments, soul fragments — those were not a true measure of strength, anyway. Sunny had seen countless mundane soldiers stand and fight against the Nightmare Creatures, never surrendering despite the dire disparity of power between them. If those people were weak, then he did not know whom to call strong.

And so, at some point, he had stopped paying constant attention to Neph's runes without even noticing it.

Now, however, Sunny had the Mirror of Truth. So, he decided that it was worth taking another look.

The familiar symbols shimmered, forming into strings:

Name: Nephis.

True Name: Changing Star.

Rank: Ascended.

Class: Tyrant.

Soul Cores: [5/7].

He stared at that number for a few moments.

After years of lagging behind, Sunny had finally caught up to her… wasn't it so very funny that he had only been able to do so after stopping caring about the race?

A light smile appeared on his face.

'Whatever… she still has more fragments than I do. She'll be a Terror sooner than me.'

But did it really matter? In the end, they would both be Titans. That day was not as far away as it had once seemed, now.

Sunny continued to read:

Soul Fragments: [2719/5000].

Nephis had received many soul shards from the treasury of clan Valor after being adopted by them. However, she could not reveal the fact that she possessed a Divine Aspect and multiple soul cores — requesting more than a thousand would have been strange and aroused suspicion.

She had not been hunting down many Nightmare Creatures while Sunny had been going from one dire battle to another almost every day in the Antarctic Center, either, so her progress was slow as of late. Now that Changing Star had arrived in Antarctica, though, that was bound to change.

Sunny wondered how many soul fragments she had received in the recent battle, then turned his attention back to the runes.

Memories: [Dream Blade], [Starlight Legion Armor], [Dawn Shard], [Dark Wing], [Nameless Sun]...

There was a long list of Memories. Some of them she had received while wandering the Dream Realm and challenging the Second Nightmare… in fact, Sunny could learn a few things about what kind of trial she had faced from reading their descriptions.

But since Nephis did not want to talk about her harrowing

experience, he held himself back. Perhaps it was stupid, but… he did not want to invade her privacy.

He also wanted her to tell him herself. Sunny knew what a precious and fragile thing trust was… it had taken a lot for him to extend his own trust toward Effie and Kai. Before that, his friends had respected his desire to remain silent and did not push him to reveal his secrets. He was very thankful for that.

…Sunny was not a Saint, though. He felt no qualms about studying the Memories that clan Valor had provided to Neph. They were incredible Memories, indeed, no less outstanding than Morgan's Warbow — each crafted for the specific purpose of slaughtering Nightmare Creatures and tailored to the user.

In fact, he really wanted to borrow a few to study their weaves. He just did not know how to phrase that request.

'Hey, Neph, could you please take off your armor? I need it for a couple of weeks… no, no I won't wear it… shut up, Effie!'

Just thinking about it made him wince.

Chasing away the dreadful image, Sunny continued to study the runes.

Attributes: [Dreamspawn], [Nephilim], [Flame of Divinity], [The Fire].

[Dreamspawn] Attribute Description: "You are born of two worlds, belonging to both, but welcomed in neither. Your soul exists on the edge between nightmare and reality."

[Nephilim] Attribute Description: "There once were terrible creatures born of an unholy union between the divine and the profane. Nephilim were the most beautiful, and the most harrowing of them all."

[Flame of Divinity] Attribute Description: "Your soul is aflame with the light of divinity."

[The Fire] Attribute Description: "You have inherited the lineage of

Sun God."

Those had not changed. Sunny himself had received a couple new Attributes in the past years, but Nephis had not. Neither had she unlocked her Aspect Legacy… which was not very surprising. Each Aspect was unique, after all, and possessed unique requirements for acquiring the Legacy.

Awakened who received their Legacies were rare, and most only accomplished that feat after becoming Saints, with an even smaller number doing so as Masters. Otherwise, there would have been countless Legacy clans in the world.

So, it was Sunny who was an anomaly.

He sighed wistfully, thinking of Serpent, and turned back to the shimmering symbols.

Aspect: [Light Bringer].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Description: [You are a creature of light that was banished and doomed to exist in the darkness. You bring radiance and warmth to wherever you go, but with it comes indescribable longing.]

Innate Ability: [Halfbreed].

[Halfbreed] Ability Description: "You can directly absorb a portion of the soul essence of any Nightmare Creature destroyed by your flames, as well as of any human."

Aspect Abilities: [Soul Flame], [Flame Manipulation], [Longing].

[Soul Flame] Ability Description: "Your soul burns with the purest of flames. That flame can both restore and destroy, and is both a blessing and a curse."

He was perfectly familiar with the first of Neph's three Aspect Abilities — it had grown slightly more versatile since the Forgotten Shore, now augmenting the soul, as well, but otherwise remained the same.

The other two Abilities — her Awakened and Ascended ones, respectively — were new. The Awakened Ability was rather straightforward:

[Flame Manipulation] Ability Description: "You can bend all fire to your will."

That was how Nephis was able to control fire, turning it into her weapon. That fire did not have to be her own — although she could produce flames if there were none around at the cost of feeling terrible pain.

The Ascended Ability, on the other hand… was a bit strange.

[Longing] Ability Description: "Your soul is incorruptible."

And that was all. Not only was it a passive Ability — which was incredibly rare for Ascended Abilities — it also did not do anything. It did not even raise Neph's protection against soul attacks, or improve the rate of her essence regeneration.

For all intents and purposes, [Longing] was useless.

…Of course, Sunny knew a thing or two about the type of Corruption the runes spoke of. So, he understood how incredibly special that Ability was.

In theory.

In practice, they had never even faced Corruption. Sunny did not even know of anyone who knew how Corruption happened. All humans were familiar with was the result of it… the Nightmare Creatures.

Against those, having a pure soul was of no help.

A pure soul…

Sunny sighed and looked at the last string of runes.

Flaw: [Pristine Soul].

Flaw Description: [You must suffer to use your power.]

He lingered for a while, staring at them, and then dismissed the symbols.

'I don't think I'll be using the Mirror of Truth on Nephis… unless I'm about to kill a truly powerful Nightmare Creature — or human — and want to absorb an incredible amount of shadow fragments.'

But then again, would it even work? The description of the [Halfbreed] Innate Ability spoke of soul essence, not shadow essence.

No, he would have to find better targets.

And speaking of better targets…

His shadows were already getting close to the emissaries of Song and Valor.

Chapter-1125: Private Conversations

Today, luck was on Sunny's side.

Usually, he would not have been able to listen in on the really important conversations between the emissaries of the great clans. They were too cautious… and he was very cautious, as well. Perhaps he could overcome the defensive measures his targets had in place, but the cost of failure was too great.

So, he had been reluctant to try.

But today, maybe because of the clamor and pressure of the ongoing clash with the Nightmare Creatures that had been drawn to the battlefield, the representatives of both Song and Valor had been slightly neglectful. And since Sunny had already spent a month learning how to get closer to them, he managed to witness two very interesting conversations.

The first one was between Morgan and Madoc. The two members of the Valor family remained in the stone fort on top of the giant Echo's carapace, speaking about something as they observed the constant stream of abominations being ground against the outer perimeter of the camp.

Of course, no one could hear what they were saying, since the two were surrounded by an invisible barrier that prevented any sound from coming out. Even the movement of their lips was obscured. There were Memories active that made it almost impossible for someone to divine the conversation, as well.

…However, Sunny was not a diviner. Much more importantly, he managed to get inside the circle of silence by hiding his own shadows in the shadow of one of Valor's Awakened. The man had been invited

to make a report, and so, Morgan herself led him through the layers of wards surrounding the fort.

When the Awakened arrived, she studied him for a few moments, then asked in a neutral tone:

"Is there news, Squire Warren?"

The Awakened shifted slightly. He tried to hide his excitement at the fact that she knew his name, but failed miserably — Sunny mentally rolled his eyes, while Morgan pretended not to notice.

Well, the poor man could not be blamed. How often did ordinary Awakened retainers in service of the great clan closely interact with its princess? Very rarely, most likely.

Morgan was a striking person, as well — despite her coldness and sharpness, she was someone even Sunny found hard to look away from. There was just something about the young woman and her vibrant vermilion eyes that demanded attention.

Not to mention the fact that she was quite literally a member of exalted royalty.

In any case, Squire Warren did have something to report. He bowed to Morgan and Madoc, then spoke in a deep, respectful voice:

"We received word from Knight Shtad, my lady. His cohort had survived the second night and secured a fortified position. Their report indicates that the divination seems to have been correct."

At the mention of that last part, Madoc and Morgan exchanged a glance, their expressions subtly changing.

Back in the tent, Sunny frowned.

'Knight Shtad…'

He was one of the Masters that had arrived with Summer Knight. His cohort had been among those secretly sent to search for suitable Nightmare Gates. It appeared that they were already in the Dream Realm, and had found something important to boot.

Morgan lingered for a few moments, then sighed.

"Finally, some good news… what about the rest of the scouts?"

Squire Warren looked down and gritted his teeth.

"Lost or forced to enter the Seeds, my lady. However, now that we have secured several entry points… the next cohorts we send will survive, honoring their sacrifice."

She nodded.

"Indeed…"

At that point, Madoc finally spoke.

"The most important thing right now is to reinforce Shtad. His mission might very well decide the outcome of this phase of the conflict. Warren… tell your men to prepare. Once we return to the siege capital, I will personally transport you to the desert. You must succeed at any cost."

He lingered for a moment, and then added:

"...If my niece does not object, of course."

Morgan smiled.

"Why would I? Squire Warren has a sharp blade, and his comrades are the same. They will bring clan Valor glory."

The Awakened man lowered his head, his eyes igniting with exhilaration and zeal.

"You honor me, Lady Morgan! Sir Madoc... we won't let you down!"

Whispering Blade smiled.

"Of course you won't. You are warriors of Valor, after all…"

Beaming with pride, Squire Warren left. Sunny's shadow, however, remained.

Which was why it heard Morgan's voice change slightly as she addressed Madoc:

"Shouldn't we send someone more powerful?"

Whispering Blade shook his head.

"Don't be impatient. It's too early to risk our champions. Once the target is secured, we will have an almost insurmountable advantage over the Blood Daughters… then, we can truly begin."

Morgan looked away and grimaced.

"I know. It's just that… you know what is at stake."

She remained silent for a few moments, then smiled.

"...Should we send Nephis, then?"

Madoc's face changed slightly.

"Don't even think about it. You know how your father feels about her."

Morgan sighed, then looked in the direction of the battlefield.

"Fickle man…"

Far away, hidden safely in the tent, Sunny was frowning.

What exactly had the scouts found in the desert? What was the insurmountable advantage Valor wanted to secure at all costs?

At this stage in the race toward the Black Pyramid, both clans were trying to establish a foothold in the desert. They were slowly ramping up the search for Nightmare Gates that led to relatively safe areas, to use them as entry points for the expedition forces. A few of these areas had apparently already been found. What else could Knight Shtad be hunting for?

Some kind of precious resource or revelation about that region of the Dream Realm? A natural stronghold that could serve as a fortress for

the forces of Valor?

A Citadel, even?

There was that last part of the conversation, as well…

It was, honestly, rather disturbing. There seemed to be something complicated going on within clan Valor. But Sunny had no idea what.

Strangely enough… it was the emissaries of Song that helped him shed some light on that situation.

Because they were currently talking about Nephis, as well.

In a distant part of the camp, within the circle of armored vehicles, a lavish tent had been raised. Beastmaster and Seishan were inside. At the moment, Beastmaster was enjoying a bowl of fresh fruit as she looked at her sister with a pleasant smile.

Her words, however, were anything but pleasant.

Beastmaster was saying:

"...should we kill that girl, Changing Star?"

Chapter-1126: Unexpected Revelation

Sunny did not have much of a reaction to that statement. Hearing a terrifying existence like Beastmaster contemplating the murder of one of his close ones… was certainly a chilling experience. However, the person in question was Neph. So, the feeling was not novel.

Someone was always trying to kill her.

'I'd like to see you try.'

He lingered for a moment, then shook his head.

'...Actually, no. I take it back. I would not like it one bit.'

Silence hung in the distant tent for a few moments. Seishan did not hurry with an answer.

When she eventually spoke, her voice was even:

"That would require us to commit too many resources."

Beastmaster seemed slightly surprised. The arch of her eyebrow was so exquisite that even Sunny's shadow was momentarily mesmerized. Luckily, he had sent the gloomy shadow to spy on her — that guy was not easily phased. The shadow quickly regained its composure and continued to listen.

"Too many resources? But she is just a Master."

Seishan shook her head.

"She is a Master, yes. But not just any Master."

The Saint pondered that statement for a bit as she enjoyed succulent

grapes.

"I guess you would know best. That thing she pulled off on the Forgotten Shore was indeed a thing of beauty… plus, she is a self-healer. Killing those people is such a chore."

She sighed, then said in a wistful tone:

"Why did she have to go and join that dreadful clan? Granted, we did not try to recruit her too hard… but the King of Swords, that man. What is he thinking? First, he sends the Han Li boy to kill her. Then, he welcomes her into his family. Truly is shameless…"

Sunny's eyes widened slightly.

'So it was Anvil?'

Finally, he knew who had stood behind Caster. Granted, there was nothing to do with that information…

Seishan seemed surprised, too. Her exotic, beautiful face darkened a little.

"...I thought it was us who sent him. Has the Han Li clan forgotten their loyalty?"

Beastmaster laughed.

"No… you've been lost in the Dream Realm for too long, Shan. You forget that for most lesser clans, our three great families are a monolith. Most of the time, they can only guess which Domain gives the order."

She swallowed another grape and smiled.

"Oh, we sent someone to kill her in the Dream Realm too. It's just that our messenger ended up being rather useless. He did not even make it to the Dark City."

Sunny shifted slightly. So there had been other assassins except for Caster… the Forgotten Shore had taken care of them so that he didn't have to.

The Saint, meanwhile, scoffed:

"But that girl is really too lucky. When she was a child, the Dreamspawn held us back from going after her in full force. Now that the abomination is indisposed, she is an Ascended. And such a troublesome one, at that."

This time, Sunny could not contain his agitation. What he just heard was a real bomb.

'The Dreamspawn… Asterion?'

The most mysterious of the Sovereigns, Asterion… had protected Nephis when she was a child? What? Why would he do that?

Admittedly, Sunny had always felt that there was something strange about Neph's childhood story. The Great Clans had always been trying to kill her, sending one assassin after another… and yet, why had they failed? Why had they not sent a Saint to solve the problem once and for all?

He had assumed that there were two possibilities. Either the task of slaying the last daughter of the Immortal Flame had not been an important one, or the Domains were constrained by having to act in secret. A Saint moving to kill a mundane human, especially one from a prominent family, was not an easy thing to cover, considering that they were always in the spotlight…

Or at least that was what he had thought before. Now, after learning more about the great clans and how they operated, Sunny came to understand that there was nothing stopping them from slaughtering anyone they wanted with impunity… except for each other.

If Asterion had been the one to constrain Valor and Song in their attempts to get rid of Nephis, that would explain a lot.

But pose even more questions.

For example, what was his motivation?

Was it because she was a Dreamspawn, like he was? Some sort of sentiment the enigmatic Sovereign felt for the daughter of his former

comrade? Something else entirely?

Sunny simply did not know. And, sadly, Beastmaster did not go into detail.

Seishan, meanwhile, looked at the relaxed Saint with a frown. The corner of her mouth twitched downward.

"...You grew too arrogant, Bin. Do not speak of that creature aloud."

Strangely enough, Beastmaster acted as if she was at fault. Instead of rebuking Seishan for admonishing her, the older and more powerful of the two, she nodded with a guilty look.

"Sorry… you are right."

She remained silent for a bit, then shook her head.

"But something has to be done about Changing Star. The Awakened under her command were already a problem. I have hoped that Nightingale and Raised by Wolves would keep their distance, but they seem too friendly with her… neither can be underestimated. And now there is that Master Sunless, as well. What a brutal character… and in such a cute package. What a shame.

Wasn't he supposed to be a simple scout?"

Seishan smiled slightly.

"You keep underestimating the survivors of the Forgotten Shore. No one who survived there is simple. Sunless… there's more to him than meets the eye. He is a madman, though. Back in the Dark City, he had a falling out with Changing Star and spent months living in the ruins alone. Even I would not have survived that, but he did."

Beastmaster thought for a few moments.

"Our guest had a few brushes with Ascended Sunless, yes? He did not speak about him much, so I assumed that there is little to be said. I should have known better, though. That… person… has strange standards. To him, another madman is not even worth mentioning."

Sunny noted two things from that exchange. First, his ploy to appear as a savage brute was at least partially successful. Second, Mordret had not shared his secrets with the great clan Song… just as Sunny had expected.

'No surprise here…'

Beastmaster swallowed another grape, then suddenly asked:

"How is Bast doing, by the way? Are you taking good care of him?"

Seishan stared at her sister for a while, not amused.

"He is doing fine. As for Nephis and her Fire Keepers — at this point, our efforts would be better spent elsewhere."

The Saint laughed.

"Good, good… alright, let's not kill Changing Star and her allies yet."

She lingered for a moment, and then smiled.

"We do have to kill someone, though. Time is of the essence…"

Chapter-1127: Escalation

There were more interesting things said that night. Sitting on a cot in a remote tent, Sunny had silently absorbed them all. There was a somber expression on his face.

'Troublesome.'

Each clan was planning to test the other during the retreat back to the siege capitals… which had not come as a surprise. From this point forward, the hostilities between Valor and Song were only going to escalate. If anything, this first confrontation was shaping out to be rather tame.

Neither of the sides was fully committing their Saints to the ambushes, preferring to bide their time and turn the conflict into a war of attrition. There were valuable assets that both clans kept under layers of protection — in terms of the ruthless economy of war, trying to take these assets off the board was not cost-effective at this point in time.

Luckily, Nephis seemed to be one such asset, as well.

However, neither Valor nor Song could keep all their people protected. Cohorts of Awakened had to be sent out into the wilderness to scout for suitable Nightmare Gates. Scouts had to enter the Dream Realm and explore the deadly desert in search of positions that were suitable for establishing fortified expedition camps. Ascended like Knight Shtad had to lead the most important of these teams.

These were the people the great clans were going to go after first — in East Antarctica, and in the Dream Realm at the later stages of the conflict.

Which Sunny did not mind one bit. The only thing he regretted was

that he would not be able to get snacks and comfortably watch the soldiers of the great clans slaughter each other… as long as they limited their feud to outside the city walls.

Sadly — and predictably — that was already not the case.

Beastmaster was not satisfied with picking off Awakened cohorts in the wilderness. So, she was planning to deliver a more damaging strike to her enemies.

There were two possible targets — the headquarters of the Valor clan in the siege capital where Sunny was headed, or Saint Tyris and her White Feather clan in the city where central Army Command and Wake of Ruin were based.

She chose the former.

…Morgan, meanwhile, was perfectly aware of the fact that an attack on her base of operations was imminent. Whether it was through some form of divination or simply through knowing her enemy and possessing a frighteningly sharp strategic mind, Sunny did not know. Regardless of the reason, she was not planning on preventing the assassins from infiltrating the siege capital.

Instead, she was planning to lure them into a trap and slaughter them all.

Imagining what sort of destruction the clash of two hidden forces would wreak in the heart of a besieged city, Sunny couldn't help but feel cold fury. Neither of the great clans cared about collateral damage. All they cared about was destroying the enemy.

In fact, they seem to care about it a little bit too much.

Sunny had gotten a strange feeling from observing the four leaders of the secret war — Madoc, Morgan, Seishan, and Beastmaster. There were small details in what they said and how they said it that did not make a lot of sense. It was as though they were under pressure… even more pressure than there was supposed to be. That pressure made them want to hurry.

Which was why Morgan was also considering a clandestine attack of

her own… hers, however, was going to be much more daring and surgical.

Because, unlike her adversary, she was sending an actual Saint instead of a team of Awakened led by a few Masters. Sir Madoc, the Whispering Blade, was going to personally deliver her lethal will to the enemy.

His target was not the Antarctic headquarters of clan Song, nor was it a large-scale destruction of their assets. Instead, he had to capture a single man.

Mordret.

The bleak man who called himself Ascended Bast was still in a siege capital controlled by Song. By now, he started silently spreading the mirrors he had created throughout the city… no one on the Valor side knew what the purpose of his strange actions were, but they were determined to prevent whatever he was doing from coming to fruition.

Madoc was going to infiltrate the siege capital and either destroy or contain the Prince of Nothing with the help of special weapons crafted by the King of Swords.

It was a tremendous commitment for Morgan, considering how important Whispering Blade was. Sending him after Mordret meant that he would not be able to provide support for the forces of Valor anywhere else for a period of time. But on this, Sunny had to agree with the daughter of Anvil… getting rid of the Prince of Nothing was a more dire need than suppressing — or even killing — one Song's Saints.

The bastard was just too ineffable.

So, that was what the near future held for Sunny. He would follow the forces of Valor back to their siege capital, fighting a probing ambush staged by Song in the process. Once there, Madoc would send off reinforcements for Knight Shtad and depart, leaving Morgan to deal with the team of assassins Beastmaster was dispatching to attack their headquarters.

Sunny was not too concerned about what Whispering Blade would do to Mordret… the man was too powerful and too precise, and the decision to activate him so early into the conflict was too unexpected. No matter if he achieved his goal or not, the attack itself would be unseen and contained.

The fight between the team of Beastmaster's assassins and Morgan's warriors… now that promised to be do a lot of harm to the refugees trapped in the siege capital.

…Which was why he had made a difficult decision to leave the gloomy shadow with the forces of Song.

There was a lot of risk tied to that decision, but also a lot of potential benefit. Once enough kilometers separated Sunny from his shadow, he would lose contact with it. After that, the gloomy guy would be on his own for a while. The task in front of the shadow was both simple and difficult — to keep itself hidden, learn the identities of the assassins, and follow them back to Valor's territory.

If everything went right, Sunny would know the precise location of the infiltration team as soon as they reached the siege capital. If not… his soul might get seriously wounded or, even worse, crippled.

All he could do was trust in his shadow's competence.

Sunny stood up from his cot and stretched, hearing the sounds of the battle slowly grow less intense. Now that the dawn had come, the joint army was preparing to withdraw and dissolve into three separate forces.

His expression was slightly tense.

'...He'll be alright. The gloomy guy has been through a lot by my side, so he knows what he's doing.'

He had to.

With that, Sunny left the tent and went to find Nephis.

Chapter-1128: Contradiction

Changing Star was in a watchtower near the outer edges of the camp, observing the ongoing battle. Her gaze was locked on the lustrous figure of Summer Knight, who stood like a fortress amidst the attacking Nightmare Creatures, cutting them down with his flowing lance.

Sunny approached and stared at the slaughter, as well, wondering how was it that the Saint had not gotten a single drop of blood on his armor. Was that a skill one could learn? The black silk of the Graceless Dusk always remained pristine, rejecting any kind of taint, but the same could not be said about his skin… and hair, especially hair. Washing blood out of his hair was a real chore.

Which was one of the reasons Sunny had enjoyed the few months of being a scout and never getting his own hands dirty, instead relying on shadows to do the killing for him.

"That guy, Summer Knight, is both deadly on the battlefield and nice in person. Makes me wonder if he really is a Saint… every other Transcendent I know is either the stern stoic type, vaguely sinister, or completely insane. He really doesn't fit."

Neph glanced in his direction and smiled with the corner of her mouth.

"Maybe you just attract these kinds of people."

Sunny coughed.

Come to think of it… stern and stoic, vaguely sinister, and completely insane were all words that could be used to describe Nephis, as well.

She looked back to the battlefield and added:

"But you are right. Sir Gilead is somewhat of an outlier among the Saints. He is too… straightforward. What you see is what you get. Honor, valiance, loyalty… and all that. He is the picture of a noble knight."

Sunny remained silent for a moment.

"Is that a bad thing?"

He certainly thought that it was. A person who proclaimed these virtues was either a hypocrite or dangerously naive — gods only knew which option was worse.

However, Sunny wanted to hear Neph's answer.

She shrugged.

"Not usually. But in the case of Summer Knight, it presents a contradiction. What is a person like that doing serving the King of Swords? And not just as a vassal, but as a direct retainer of clan Valor. A tool in their machinations."

She lingered for a few moments, then sighed.

"Maybe it has something to do with his Flaw."

Sunny looked at Nephis with curiosity.

"...What are you doing serving the King of Swords?"

Her subtle smile grew a little wider, and white sparks ignited in her eyes.

"Ah, but I am not honorable, valiant, or loyal. I am just driven and good with a sword. Don't you know?"

He scoffed.

"I do. Don't I know it well."

With that, Sunny leaned on the framework of the alloy watchtower and watched the valiant Saint fight in silence.

At the same time, he sent Neph a mental message:

[What did Morgan want to talk to you about?]

She leaned on the alloy bar by his side.

[We are most likely going to be ambushed by Song on the way back to the siege capital. She warned me to be ready. There is also the issue of the Nightmare Gates within the city. There are sixteen of them, at the moment, and keeping each one contained is a drain on the resources.

Once we are back, the Awakened soldiers under Morgan's command will begin challenging the Seeds to close them… and scout the desert in the process, of course. She offered a few spots to the Fire Keepers.]

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

[The Fire Keepers? Are they going to attempt Ascension?]

Nephis lowered her head a little, nodding.

[They have long saturated their cores, and have more than enough experience. So, yes… Shim's cohort will enter first, followed by two others. A month later, two more cohorts will challenge the Second Nightmare. The last two will go after… if… the first challengers return.]

Sunny blinked.

If that plan worked… then in less than a year, Changing Star would potentially command close to fifty Masters. Some might die in the Nightmare, but still… that was a staggering force. An inconceivable force, even, by the standards of the modern world.

But then again, the world was changing. And the return of the survivors of the Forgotten Shore had made so much noise for this exact reason — not because they were powerful Awakened, but because each had a substantial chance of becoming a Master… and maybe even a Saint, in the future.

The force that Cassie had built had the potential to dramatically shift

the balance of power between the great clans. No wonder Nephis seemed to be in a hurry to send the Fire Keepers into the Seeds… the emissaries of Song knew what was at stake, as well.

Once the fighting between the forces of the great clans started in earnest, Beastmaster would without a doubt aim to destroy the Fire Keepers before they Ascended.

'How complicated.'

Sunny remained silent for a while, choosing his words carefully. Eventually, he spoke… thought… in a casual tone:

[I happened to eavesdrop on a conversation.]

Nephis glanced at him.

[Oh. By pure accident, I'm sure.]

He smiled.

Then, however, the smile disappeared from his face.

Sunny looked forward, pretending to study the battle.

[Turns out, it was your Uncle Vale who sent Caster to kill you… you know, Anvil of Valor, the King of Swords. That Uncle Vale.]

She didn't show any hint of a strong reaction.

[...I figured as much.]

Sunny sighed.

[I also overheard that another one of your father's three friends had limited the great clans in what means they could use to kill you… back when you were a child. He seems to have protected you, to a degree.]

This time, Nephis couldn't maintain the mask of indifference. Someone else might not have noticed, but Sunny knew her too well. She was shaken.

After a long pause, Neph whispered:

[...So that's how it is. I see. That explains a few things I always wondered about.]

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked:

[Do you have any idea what his reasons might be?]

Nephis remained silent for a long time, looking at the battlefield. One half of her face was illuminated by a gentle light, the other drowned in shadows. The cold wind was playing with her silver hair, making it dance.

Eventually, she let out a deep sigh.

[I don't. However, I do have a suspicion. I am the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan, Sunny… which means that I am also the last carrier of Sun God's lineage. Asterion had prevented that lineage from being snuffed out, and had taken Mordret from Anvil. It is… it is almost as if he is collecting the carriers of divine lineages.]

Nephis paused for a few moments, and then added in a grave voice:

[If my suspicion is correct… then should you meet him in the future, you would be wise to be careful too, Sunny. You do not possess Shadow God's lineage, but Asterion might not know that. Sun God, War God, Beast God, Storm God, and Heart God… all these lineages had already been found. Shadow God's was the last one to remain hidden.

Maybe that is why he stayed passive all these years… waiting patiently for it to reveal itself.]

She suddenly turned and looked him in the eyes, then said in her own voice, discarding the safety of the Blessing Dusk:

"Sunny… you have guarded your secrets well. It is very important that you continue to do so. Be careful... if you wish. Please."

The cold wind got to Sunny, as well, making him shiver.

Chapter-1129: Thieves and Wolves

Soon enough, it was time to say goodbye again. Effie and Kai were returning to the government-controlled section of East Antarctica with Wake of Ruin and Saint Tyris, while Jet was leaving with the forces of Song.

The joint army had already withdrawn from the battlefield and traveled some distance away from it. Now, it was ready to break apart… before it did, however, Sunny managed to find an opportunity to talk with Soul Reaper in private.

The long column of vehicles had come to a stop, and they found each other among the busy chaos of imminent separation.

"How is living with the Song clan treating you?"

Jet smiled a little, then shrugged.

"It's treating me fine. I am often reminded of why was it exactly that I never wanted to be a part of a Legacy clan… but it's fine. Weirdly, I feel a bit of kinship with these women. "

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Kinship, really? Why?"

She lingered for a few moments.

"A thief knows a thief, as a wolf knows a wolf. It's just a vague feeling, but I think that their Flaws are similar to mine… not exactly the same, but similar. I have no solid proof, of course, but there are ways to tell. A thing like that influences you in many subtle ways."

Jet looked away and let out a wistful sigh.

"All of Ki Song's daughters are adopted, you know? Many of them were taken from the outskirts when they were very young. Who knows, in another life, I might have been a princess of a great clan, as well… wouldn't that be a sight?"

Sunny looked at her gloomily, trying to imagine Soul Reaper in the traditional wine-red attire of the Song clan. However, his imagination failed him.

...No matter how hard Sunny tried, he just couldn't imagine Jet wearing a dress.

He scoffed.

"I do know, and yes, that would be a sight. However, I like the current you much more."

Soul Reaper laughed.

"...Me too, Sunny, me too. You are maybe a bit too young to understand the sentiment, but… I fought long and hard to become the current me. I wouldn't trade it for the world."

The smile slowly disappeared from her face, and she looked at him with a somber expression.

"You know that things are about to change in East Antarctica, right?"

Sunny slowly nodded, prompting her to ask:

"So, what are you going to do?"

He remained silent for a few moments, then shrugged.

"Probably something stupid. But… not too stupid. It's hard to tell, yet."

Soul Reaper studied his face for a while, then nodded.

"Let's stay in touch, then."

With that, she turned around and walked away, heading for the departing force of Song's Awakened.

Sunny watched Soul Reaper go, considering if he should have told her more. He had already warned her to stay clear of Mordret… as for informing Jet of the presence of his shadow, that would do neither of them any good. It was not like she could help the gloomy guy in his mission.

'There are too many unknown variables at play. I have no idea how the situation will unfold, for the both of us… one thing is certain, though. We'll cross paths again, soon, before it's all over.'

He grimaced, then went to join his own convoy.

The ostentatious tortoise Echo had been dismissed, and they were going to be traveling by using more mundane means of transportation.

But not much more mundane… many of Valor Awakened were in possession of Echo mounts, and would be riding them across the desolate landscape. There were ordinary vehicles, as well.

Sunny himself was going to catch a ride with the Fire Keepers, but before that, he sneaked into a small crevice that was drowned by deep shadows. There, he found a small figure laying motionlessly on the ground, spread-eagled, with a drunk expression on its ugly little face.

The Imp seemed to have grown bigger. His belly had, at least — it protruded from the scrawny frame of the little fiend like a balloon, looking as if it was on the verge of bursting.

Noticing Sunny, the Shadow turned its head and grinned stupidly.

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, then shook his head.

"Gods, you gluttonous little wretch. Can you even stand?"

The Imp stared at him lazily, and then answered in a grating, screeching voice:

"...Wretch!"

Sunny scowled.

"Who are you calling a wretch, you wretch?"

The Imp did not deign to answer, so he sighed and dismissed the Shadow, sending the scrawny fiend to digest his ill-gotten gains within the darkness of a Shadow Core.

'I'll check on his progress later… that bastard better have listened to me and only eaten those Nightmare Creatures that had to do something with steel and metal. Otherwise, he'll be on a vegetarian diet for a very, very long time…'

Sunny left the crevice and walked over to one of the armored vehicles. There were already a few familiar faces inside — the members of Cassie's former cohort. The healer, Shim, Kaor and Shakti, and others…

Noticing Sunny, they all became lively.

"Sunny… man! You were a real terror on the battlefield yesterday."

"When the hell did you become that scary?"

"Now I really want to Ascend, too. Maybe I'll get a pseudo-transformation ability like you!"

"You're an Artisan, Kaor. What kind of transformation are you going to get? Turn into a block of wood?"

"Better be a block of wood than a blockhead like you…"

Sunny greeted them with a few smiles and a few elusive answers, then walked over to where Cassie was sitting and looked around.

"Hey, Cas. Where's Nephis?"

The blind girl pointed forward, where another vehicle — this one larger and better armored — was visible through the windshield of the APC.

"Morgan invited her for a last-minute discussion."

He smiled darkly.

"Oh, yeah? Discussion of what?"

Cassie lingered with the answer.

"Probably the ambush."

He really did not know what to say.

'What kind of stupid ambush is this, when everyone knows that it's happening? Damn, I'm sure that even the ambushers know that we know. The sheer stupidity of it all…'

Sunny sighed, then sat near Cassie and grew quiet.

Soon, the column of vehicles started to move, surrounded by a moving shield of mounted Awakened.

The human forces were returning victorious from a dire battle with a harrowing horde of Nightmare Creatures, having slayed four powerful Titans.

But what awaited them was not the warm welcome of the citizens, but the swords and bullets of fellow humans.

He shook his head dejectedly.

'No... actually, there might be Nightmare Creatures in the ambush, as well. That's Beastmaster we are talking about, after all…'

Chapter-1130: Closeness

The journey back to the Valor enclave in East Antarctica was going to take several days. On the first day, the Awakened riders charged forward many times, slaughtering any band of Nightmare Creatures that was unfortunate enough to wander into the convoy's path.

Awakened and Fallen abominations were ruthlessly cut down long before they could pose a threat to the vehicles. When a Corrupted one appeared, the Knights of Valor attacked personally. Watching these exalted Masters fight was both an inspiration and a grim reminder of what Sunny contended against.

Each of them was no less deadly than Pierce and Welthe, Mordret's jailers, had been… maybe even more so. With the Knights slaying the more dangerous Nightmare Creatures, none of the Saints had to personally intervene yet.

There were also Morgan's Echoes. Strangely enough, there were only a few of them in view — the Princes of War must have dismissed some of them, for now.

Of course, there was also another possibility. Morgan could have sent several Echoes to stage an ambush of her own.

In fact, Sunny was more or less certain that she had.

He had spent the last month carefully studying the expedition force of the great clan. By now, he knew the faces of pretty much every Awakened, Ascended, and mundane specialist that Valor had sent to the Southern Quadrant, as well as the rough outline of their abilities.

Which was why it had not escaped Sunny's attention that several cohorts of Awakened that had participated in the battle against the titanic horde were mysteriously missing from the convoy. They were, most likely, en route to lay a trap for the returning force of Song

warriors.

He did not envy them one bit.

Sunny himself spent the first daday silently observing how the warriors of Valor fought through the shadows. He thought about striking up a conversation with Cassie, but found it hard to find a topic to discuss. At least one that did not have to do with Nightmare Creatures, machinations of the great clans, or the tumultuous future facing them all.

…Work, basically.

It was a bit strange. He had thought that they were close — despite everything, there were very few people in this world, if any, who were closer to him than her.

And yet, Sunny realized that he did not know much about Cassie outside the dire reality of being an Awakened. He never met her family, which she mentioned so much on the Forgotten Shore. He had never visited her home, or learned of her hobbies — things she enjoyed, things she found frustrating.

He didn't even know what her official position in clan Valor was, and how her life had changed because of it.

That realization was… disheartening.

Granted, Cassie herself was part of the reason for the distance between them. After Awakening, she seemed to have closed herself off from the outside world, somewhat. After the Ascension, her isolation had only grown more pronounced — it was as though the blind girl was making a conscious effort to blend into the background, becoming as obscure and forgettable as possible.

But still…

Sunny glanced at her with a complicated expression. A sudden thought crossed his mind:

'...I don't think I ever wished her a happy birthday.'

That had been how they met, all those years ago… well, actually, it was only around four years ago. On the day of the winter solstice, in the Academy cafeteria, Cassie had suddenly wished him a happy birthday. She was more or less the only Sleeper who had spoken to him there.

Sunny knew that Cassie was the youngest of the cohort, and that her birthday was somewhere in late June or early July… close to Rain's. This year, he had been busy fighting his way to Falcon Scott during that time, so there was a solid excuse.

However, there were the years before that.

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking.

Then, he shifted slightly and asked:

"By the way, Cassie, how is your family doing?"

She did not react for a moment, then turned her head slightly and frowned in confusion.

"...What?"

Sunny leaned back.

"I said, how is your family doing?"

The blind girl hesitated. Then, a subtle smile illuminated her delicate face.

"Oh! They are doing well. I applied to have their citizenship rank raised, so my mom can't stop bragging to the neighbors. Dad had to have a talk to her… right after taking driving lessons and purchasing a PTV license. He parks the PTV where everyone can see it, too… so I think I'll be the one who has to have a talk with him, now…"

Sunny chuckled.

"Ah, I understand. You might not know it, but I took driving lessons, as well — from an actual ace pilot, by the way. Uh… my ride sort of blew up, but when we get back to NQSC, I'll definitely buy a new

one. And when I do… you can count on it being parked in the most visible places often…"

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, then asked with strange curiosity:

"...What else do you want to do when you get back?"

He scratched the back of his head.

"Huh… I actually have not given it much thought. Well, first things first — my shop is in desperate need of new exclusive merchandise. I've been practicing a lot here in Antarctica, so I might be able to bring the Brilliant Emporium to an entirely new level. Maybe I'll even branch out and open a Memory boutique in Bastion. Oh, also… I've been thinking about opening a restaurant.

Feeding people and making money at the same time, isn't that a dream?"

Sunny thought for a bit, and then added:

"I'm going to need to be in Bastion a lot, if I want to do proper business. I don't want to be anchored there, though… so, maybe I'll find a scenic, quiet Citadel somewhere nearby. Out of the way of the mess between Valor and Song."

He smiled, then asked:

"How about you?"

Cassie simply sighed.

"I think I'll be very busy after returning to NQSC. If I do have some free time… all I want to do is wear pajamas around the house and do nothing."

She lingered for a moment, then suddenly flashed him a smile:

"I do promise to visit your restaurant, though! I'll even leave a big tip..."

As they talked, the sun wobbled to the edge of the sky, never falling behind the horizon, but turning the world dim.

The convoy came to a stop, preparing for the next leg of the journey.

In that lull, an Awakened from Clan Valor arrived, putting an end to their conversation.

Chapter-1131: Foresight

It was very easy to send a message through the short-range communication network of the convoy, but Morgan had deemed it necessary to send an actual person to fetch them.

The Awakened approached the APC where Sunny and Cassie were, his imposing armored figure appearing in view of the external cameras of the armored vehicle, and politely knocked on the main hatch. When one of the Fire Keepers opened it, the man cleared his throat and said with solemn gravitas:

"Lady Song of the Fallen, Ascended Sunless. Lady Morgan is inviting you to join her in the head vehicle at your convenience."

Sunny recognized the Awakened from spying on Morgan and Madoc yesterday. The guy sure was a bit too pompous for a glorified messenger… but remembering his earnest reaction to Whispering Blade's praise, that was not at all unexpected.

All Valor Awakened were like that — too serious and full of ardent devotion. The Fire Keepers were zealously devoted to their leader, too, but at least they did not stand on ceremony.

They saw Nephis as the best of them, as opposed to better than them. There was an important distinction.

Sunny shook his head, then nodded at the awkward Awakened and rose from the crate he was sitting on. Cassie stood up, too, and followed him outside. Her steps were cautious, but she seemed to have no problem navigating the world without being able to see it.

It was a far cry from how helpless she had been on the Forgotten Shore.

Her hand was resting on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer, too, reminding

Sunny how deadly of a fighter she had become. Of course, with most of her Abilities having nothing to do with combat, Cassie's battle prowess could not compare to that of more straightforward Masters.

Still, he wouldn't want to fight someone who knew his every move in advance. Sunny understood very well how dreadful such an opponent would be, because he himself cut down many foes by relying on Shadow Dance.

The Awakened Squire kept a respectful silence as he led them to the head of the column, where an armored vehicle that would put even the Rhino to shame stood just before a wide crossroad. It was surrounded by a watchful ring of Awakened warriors. They gave Sunny and Cassie stern looks, then stepped aside to let them through.

It was nonsensical, really. Currently, two of the most deadly Masters in the world and Whispering Blade himself were inside the vehicle… what could these Awakened do to protect them?

Once inside, Sunny saw Morgan, Madoc, and Nephis gathered around a holographic table that showed a topographical projection of the surrounding area. Some distance away, a few spots were marked with red. It did not take a genius strategist to know that those were the most convenient places for an ambush.

At least Sunny would have chosen them if he had to lay a trap for the forces of Valor.

Then again, Sunny did not really need a convenient spot and advantageous terrain to ambush someone… all he needed was a bit of shadow.

Morgan welcomed them with a nod and gestured for them to come closer. Once they did, she addressed Cassie in a neutral tone:

"Cassia, do you have anything to share with us?"

The blind girl nodded, then lingered for a few moments. Eventually, he raised her hand and pointed to a particular red mark.

"There."

Morgan smiled, while Madoc raised his brow slightly.

"How do you know, young lady?"

Sunny had the same question, although he also had an idea of what the answer would be.

He slightly shook his head, feeling a strange mix of awe, admiration, and dejection.

Cassie, meanwhile, lowered her hand and explained:

"I used the time the forces of both clans recently spent together to mark several of Song's people with my Ascended Ability. Many of them possess powerful Memories to disrupt attempts at divination… but there are very few that can disrupt my powers. Certainly not enough to protect every Awakened in their camp."

She turned to the map and added calmly:

"Currently, one of the marked is in that ravine, surrounded by three cohorts of Awakened. These Awakened are only a part of the ambush, however. The main striking force is underwater in a nearby lake… several hundred Nightmare Creatures, all tamed by Beastmaster and controlled by an Ascended proxy.

I don't have eyes on them, but the person I marked discussed the details of the attack with the Ascended prior to separating. I listened."

Madoc chuckled.

"Lady Cassia… ah, I wouldn't want to be your enemy. Wonderfully done."

Cassie simply offered him a curt nod.

Morgan glanced at them and smiled.

"Isn't she wonderful, indeed?"

With that, she patted the blind girl on the shoulder.

"Better yet, Cassia is the only person on the continent that can never be taken by that abominable kin of ours, which only makes me appreciate her more. We should employ more blind people, don't you think, Uncle?"

That last statement was said in a nonchalant and slightly amused tone, and really rubbed Sunny the wrong way.

If Cassie felt the same, though, she did not let it show.

…Just like that, the probing ambush of Clan Song was laid bare. The convoy had no choice but to take the route through the area where the trap was prepared for them, but knowing what to expect, they could descend upon the ambushers and cut them down in one fell swoop.

No wonder Morgan was pleased.

At that moment, Nephis spoke, glancing at the Princess of War coldly:

"Let's not draw this out. We should dismantle the ambush as soon as possible… and stay on guard. Cassie is powerful, but she is not all-powerful. There might be other aspects of the trap that we failed to account for."

Morgan smiled.

"A good suggestion. Since you were the one to voice it, dear sister… why don't you take your Fire Keepers and deal with this issue personally? They'll be leaving for the Nightmares soon, so this might be their last opportunity to wet their blades with the blood of Song for a long while."

Nephis turned away and looked at the map with a bleak expression.

"...I will."

Sunny, who had remained silent all that time, cleared his throat.

"Sorry… but should I be hearing this conversation? Why am I here, exactly?"

Morgan looked at him with confusion, then chuckled.

"Why, you are a representative of the government, Master Sunless. You are the perfect person to share the vile machinations of the Song clan with. Who knows, maybe I'll want to lodge a complaint with the authorities later. You'll be an important witness."

Then, she smiled at him.

"...Plus, I thought that you might enjoy a small distraction like this. Would you please accompany my little sister on this mission, Master Sunless? As a neutral observer, of course. It would really make me feel better about her safety."

Sunny stared at her with a dubious expression.

'Yeah… right.'

The battle maniac probably just wanted to see him kill something again. Or maybe deepen his connection to the Valor clan through bloodshed.

He shrugged.

"Sure... why not? I am a part of this convoy as well, after all. If we really were to be ambushed, my safety would be compromised too."

The Princess of War nodded, then crossed her arms and looked at the map.

"True. I'll be awaiting good news, then…"

Chapter-1132: Ambush

The contingent of Valor soldiers camped for a few hours of rest, while several vehicles containing the Fire Keepers secretly continued forward. They advanced at moderate speed for a few hours, then hid the vehicles between the rusty ruins of massive machines left behind by the Dark Times and continued toward the place of the ambush on foot.

Sunny walked with them, scouting the path ahead with his shadows. As he did, he heard the Fire Keepers talk.

One of them — a tall young man who possessed the Ability to summon two more arms and fought by wielding two greatswords — was speaking in a contemplative tone:

"...It's been a while since I killed a human. Honestly, I sort of assumed that I would never have to do it again after leaving the Forgotten Shore. Should have known better, really."

He sighed, then glanced at the leader of his cohort:

"What about you, Shim?"

Shim, the healer who usually fought where the battle was direst, wielding a shield and a spear, shrugged.

"I don't think I've ever killed a human."

The others looked at him with surprise.

"What are you talking about, you maniac? I personally saw you gut at least half a dozen Guards in the throne room of the Bright Castle. And that was just day one of that mess."

The healer glanced at them evenly.

"Those weren't humans. They didn't qualify."

Even Sunny was given pause by that cold logic.

…Shim was right about something, though. Some humans were worse than Nightmare Creatures.

In any case, the Fire Keepers did not seem too opposed to the idea of fighting against one of the great clans. Perhaps the fact that Clan Song was currently laying a trap to attack their convoy played a part in their nonchalance, but they would have probably followed Nephis even if the situation was reversed.

As for Changing Star herself, she had grown quiet in anticipation of the battle, mentally preparing herself for the strain of using her Aspect.

Sunny did not want to bother her.

Eventually, they neared the spot marked on the map and switched to moving stealthily, slowly getting closer and closer to the ravine where three cohorts of Song Awakened were laying in ambush. Cassie confirmed that they were still there, and helped the Fire Keepers avoid being seen by the hidden watchmen.

The lake where the hundreds of tamed Nightmare Creatures hid was also nearby, separated from the ravine by a few hundred meters of dirt and a weathered cement road.

When they came into view of the ravine, bending low to the ground to remain unnoticed, Nephis stopped and looked at her soldiers. One of them whispered calmly:

"What's the plan, Lady Changing Star?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then said simply:

"Slaughter them all."

Neph sighed, then summoned a Memory that resembled a torch made of polished black wood, with the cage at the top of it forged out of silvery metal. Turning around to shield it from view with her body,

she activated the enchantment of the torch, causing a cold blue flame to ignite in the cage.

She raised one hand, drawing the stream of blue fire into it.

"...Cassie, I'll leave the Ascended to you."

The blind girl nodded, then unsheathed the Quiet Dancer. The slender rapier slipped out of her hand, hovered in the air for a moment, and then flew toward the calm lake. It stayed close to the ground, almost unseen.

The blue fire, meanwhile, was flowing into Neph's hand and swirling, slowly coalescing into a sphere. No matter how much fire she drew from the silver torch, it continued to burn with the same intensity. The rippling blue sphere began to collapse onto itself and compress as more and more flame was added to it.

Its heat was growing unbearable.

As the density of the sphere increased, wisps of white flame rose from her skin and mixed into it. Slowly, the color of the blue flames began to lighten, growing from deep blue to light blue.

And, eventually, to pure white.

By that time, the sphere was trembling violently, as if struggling to contain the furious power contained within it, and Neph's face grew pale. Then, she suddenly made a fist, compressing the sphere even further.

At that moment, it was hard not to notice the pale radiance emanating from her figure.

There was some movement in the ravine, but it was too late.

Standing to her full height, Changing Star took a step forward and whipped her arm forward, as if throwing a discus.

The small sphere of white flame pierced the air, leaving a trail of scorched earth in its wake. It disappeared into the ravine a second later, and then, the ground shook. There was a blinding flash, and a

deafening boom. A fountain of fire suddenly shot from the ravine into the cold sky, washing the world in white.

…Just like that, the three cohorts of Awakened elites were wiped out.

Nephis looked a little tired.

A few moments later, Cassie turned her head and spoke:

"The Ascended is dead."

Neph nodded, then turned to the Fire Keepers.

"Get ready."

The waters of the calm lake suddenly boiled, and a flood of abominations started to emerge from them, all surging toward the small hill they stood upon.

The young man whom Sunny had overheard speaking to Shim earlier scratched the back of his head with one of his four hands.

"...Well, I guess I won't have to kill any humans today, either."

With that, he shrugged and summoned his greatswords.

The Fire Keepers calmly faced the tide of Nightmare Creatures.

…Not too long after that, every last one of the abominations was wiped out. Not a drop of human blood had been spilled — at least on the Valor side.

Sunny observed it all with a detached expression. From start to finish, he had not moved a finger. It was honestly kind of… anticlimactic.

'Wasn't I complaining about having to wash blood off myself a couple of days earlier, though?'

...It was nice to work with professionals.

Chapter-1133: Chilling Message

The Fire Keepers had retraced their steps, returning to where they had left the vehicles. The mood among the veterans of the Forgotten Shore was neutral… it was as if they had fought a mundane battle, not one that would become the opening act of a bloody confrontation between two great clans.

Sunny, however, felt slightly dejected. He had no pity for the Awakened of the great clan Song — they would not have any pity on him if the situation was reversed, either. And yet, all of it was such a shameful waste. Valor and Song were wasting the lives of skilled warriors, and in the middle of the Chain of Nightmares, no less.

That was both odious and the reason for why those who followed their orders did not deserve his pity... or his mercy.

The armored vehicles moved across the desolate landscape of Antarctica, returning victorious to the camp. They navigated the treacherous expanse of countless rivers and lakes and rejoined the main force of the Valor clan close to dawn — which was not much different from night and day in Antarctica.

Their return did not cause much fanfare, mostly because few people knew of the impending ambush. Those who did or were smart enough to figure things out on their own, however, paid the small column of vehicles close attention. Their faces changed slightly when they saw that none of the Fire Keepers seemed to be missing, or even bear any wounds.

The skilled Awakened of the great clan were begrudgingly impressed, if not envious.

Sunny left the APC with the rest of the Forgotten Shore Awakened to stretch his legs. Nephis and Cassie left to make a report to Morgan, but he stayed behind.

There was no point in being there personally, anyway… one of his shadows was going instead, hidden within Neph's.

The conversation went more or less exactly as he had expected. Morgan seemed both pleased and disappointed by the easy victory the Fire Keepers had achieved. She had expected more from the forces of the famed Clan Song. Madoc offered Nephis mild praise with a polite smile.

Both were impatient to get to the real bloodshed.

Changing Star herself remained impassive. She did not even seem moved by the boon she must have received for wiping out three cohorts of elite Awakened… if their cores were fully saturated, the bounty of souls she had collected had to be close to a thousand fragments.

Sunny did not summon the runes to check, since he saw no reason to.

Not long after their return, the command to break camp was given, and the soldiers prepared to continue the march. Soon, the convoy started to roll forward…

Only to come to a sudden halt not a minute later.

The APC Sunny was riding on stopped so abruptly that he almost flew out of his seat.

'What the hell?'

There was some kind of disturbance outside, with soldiers exiting the vehicles and looking around in confusion. The shouts of commanders echoed in the air, and the Awakened riders spread out, turning their mounts around.

Soon, the source of the disturbance became clear — one of the APCs had failed to start and rejoin the convoy. It just stood there, unmoving, isolated from the rest by a stretch of empty space. All attempts to contact the cohort of Awakened assigned to the APC failed.

Suddenly, Sunny felt a chill creep up his spine.

He looked at the head vehicle through one of his shadows. Right at that moment, its hatch opened, and Morgan emerged, her vermilion eyes radiating such a sharp sense of coldness that he felt as if his soul would be cut.

The Princess of War jumped down and walked toward the tail of the convoy, her red cloak trailing behind her like a river of blood.

Madoc and Nephis followed.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then used Shadow Step to quietly appear next to them.

'...This should be interesting.'

The four of them approached the silent APC, which was already surrounded by a ring of Awakened soldiers. One of them took a step forward, addressing Morgan with concern:

"My lady… please, it might be dangerous…"

She walked past the Awakened without a word and raised a hand. Morgan's fingers sliced through the armored alloy of the vehicle's hatch as if it was paper, and a moment later, the dark entrance to the interior of the APC was revealed.

She dove into the darkness without a moment of hesitation. Madoc followed a second behind. Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other, and then joined them.

Sunny did not know what he had expected to see inside the silent vehicle — a scene of revolting butchery or a hidden abomination, perhaps — but what he had not expected was… nothing.

The interior of the APC was entirely empty. There were no bodies, no blood, no signs of the struggle… and no Awakened, either. It was as if they had disappeared into thin air.

Morgan looked around with a grim face, then walked over to the pilot's cabin and reached behind the backrest of the seat, grasping something.

…Turns out, Sunny was mistaken. There was something left inside the APC, and she was currently holding it in her hand.

A single, unassuming arrow with dull-colored fletching and an arrowhead cast out of mundane alloy.

Morgan gritted her teeth, her eyes burning with fury.

Her voice sounded like the hiss of a sword leaving its scabbard:

"Silent Stalker..."

Sunny looked around the empty vehicle with a complicated expression.

'A Saint was here?'

The mystery of what had happened to the cohort of Valor's Awakened… was not a mystery anymore.

The Fire Keepers had dismantled the ambush prepared for the convoy by the forces of Song. But while they were doing it, someone else had entered the heavily guarded camp unseen, slaughtered a cohort of elite Awakened without making a single sound, and left, taking their bodies away.

That someone was Silent Stalker, a Transcendent huntress and one of Ki Song's daughters.

She even left one of her arrows behind, to let the enemy know who the perpetrator was.

A Saint could have wreaked much more havoc, if they wanted to… but Silent Stalker had seemingly only wanted to do one thing.

Prove a point.

Morgan snarled, then snapped the arrow with her thumb and threw the pieces away.

Madoc grimaced, then said evenly:

"Beastmaster is sending a message. It seems that she wants to provoke us."

His niece remained silent for a few moments, composing herself.

Then, she suddenly smiled.

Her previous disappointment appeared to be gone.

"...Message received."

Chapter-1134: Peaceful Morning

Nothing else happened on their way back to the siege capital. It had grown harder to eavesdrop on Morgan and Madoc once again, so Sunny didn't learn much about the consequences of Beastmaster's mocking message. He did, however, understand from small hints and clues that Valor's own ambush had gone slightly better than the one prepared by Song.

Most of the ambushers even survived, and were now following a different route to return to safe territory.

The great clans had basically exchanged slaps. What would come next were actual blows.

...It was nice to return back to civilization. Sunny slept in a soft bed, had a hot shower, and prepared himself an actual meal. Despite the dire war raging somewhere on the continent — two wars, even — his routine was strangely mundane and peaceful.

He even received a video message from Rain — the network in East Antarctica was not nearly as in shambles as it had been in the Antarctic Center, so the bandwidth allocated to him allowed for such frivolities from time to time.

To Sunny's slight disappointment, Rain only spoke about what was happening in her life for a short while, using the rest of the recording to demonstrate the progress she was making in her training and ask for pointers.

The message ended with a few carefree sentences:

"Oh… by the way, do you remember the classmate I told you about? The one whose sister is an MWP pilot in Antarctica. Apparently, her unit got into a really bad situation, and she only survived because a Master named Devil saved her. Thank the gods… I can't even imagine

how her family would have felt if not for him. Anyway, if you know that guy, buy him a drink. Better yet, try to stay close to him.

He is apparently some sort of a big hero, so you'll be safer with him. Uh… what I am trying to say is that you should be careful. Take care of yourself. Bye!"

The message ended, leaving Sunny in amused silence. He shook his head.

'What are the chances… and what the hell does she mean, do I know that guy? Have I not told her that people call me the Devil of Antarctica? I'm sure I bragged about it...'

Then, he went about composing a response, first going over her technique and swordsmanship, then adding a few phrases at the end:

"Yes, I do remember. As for the Devil… as it happens, I know him pretty well. That guy is indeed amazing. He is also very powerful, handsome, and disgustingly rich. Your classmate's sister was really very fortunate to meet him.

He mostly keeps company with Saints and beautiful Legacies from the Great Clans these days, but since you asked, I'll go buy him a drink right after finishing writing this message…"

Sunny grinned as he finished and sent the message, then fulfilled his promise by walking to the nearest provisions stall and ordering a cup of cheap synthetic coffee.

He savored its warmth on the street, watching the refugees sheltered within the city walls go about their daily lives. The atmosphere in the siege capital was not at all light — in fact, it was charged by distress and dread — but it was not at all as heavy as it had been in Falcon Scott.

No matter how full of tribulations and anxiety their lives had become, people actually lived here, not just tried desperately to survive.

Sunny felt that he was alive, too.

Rain was safe and not showing any symptoms of the Spell. The evacuation was proceeding at a healthy pace. Nephis, Cassie, Effie, Kai, and Jet were all doing fine. As for the great clans…

He now had a clear target in mind, at least. The assassins of the Song clan were going to arrive soon. Preventing the clash between them and the forces of Valor from spilling into these streets would be his first independent move.

He had to prepare well.

Sunny finished his coffee, then took a walk toward the headquarters of the Valor clan. His duties as a government envoy could not wait… there were issues he had to pass along, reports he had to make, and secrets he had to steal.

Before he could do any of it, though, Cassie stopped by the small office Sunny had been given within the compound to fetch him on behalf of Morgan. The Princess of War wanted to see him first thing in the morning, for some reason.

As they walked through the corridors of the lavish compound, Sunny glanced at the blind girl and asked:

"What exactly does she want this time?"

Cassie hesitated for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I'm not sure. She seemed excited about something… well, as far as Morgan allows herself to show genuine emotions, at least."

Sunny sighed. After a short span of silence, he asked another question:

"Hey, can you help me out with something in the near future?"

The blind girl slowed down a little.

"With what?"

He considered his words for a few moments.

"I want to visit a few places on the Chained Isles. The flying ship Noctis left behind can now descend through the Crushing, right? It will only take a couple days, if you pilot it."

Cassie smiled.

"Oh! Sure, I can help. The Ivory Tower has drifted east of the Tear, though, so the journey might take a bit more time."

Sunny had a few reasons to return to the Chained Isles… but the main one was on the Shipwreck Island, where he had fought the Wormvine.

Or rather, under it.

The remains of Sun Prince still swayed there, tangled in the broken chains. Sunny wanted the Imp to devour as much of the steel giant as possible… his initial desire to make the little fiend develop a nearly indestructible body was a lofty one, but in practice, finding enough magical metal to feed the ravenous Shadow was proving to be a problem.

So, it was very convenient to know the location of a giant, dead, ancient iron Saint.

As he was imagining how much the Imp would improve after sinking his teeth into the Sun Prince, Cassie led him to a guarded door and opened it. Sunny was a little surprised, since it was not one of the usual places where he met the emissaries of Valor.

In fact, it was a spacious, heavily reinforced dojo with all kinds of swords and implements of war resting in armored cases.

Morgan was standing in the middle of the dojo, wearing nothing except for a light black tunic. Her vermilion eyes were gleaming with sharp, intense desire.

Desire to cross swords with a worthy opponent, and destroy them.

Sunny froze.

'I… ah… I suddenly don't feel safe…'

The princess of clan Valor smiled widely at the sight of him.

"Master Sunless. If I remember correctly, you promised me a spar?"

Chapter-1135: Rematch

Sunny remembered his first clash with Morgan very well.

Back then, he had been a mere Awakened. Nevertheless, as far as Awakened went, he had considered himself to be somewhat of an outlier in terms of personal power and combat skill… he had even entertained the idea of winning their duel.

Sunny had been blessed with the powers of a Divine Aspect, trained by Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan and tempered in the ruthless crucible of the Forgotten Shore, and possessed of an Aspect Legacy.

So, there had been a reason for his confidence.

The streak of easy wins he had achieved in the Dreamscape also played a role. Even though some of the opponents he had faced were challenging foes, none managed to make him feel seriously threatened.

Sunny had involuntarily grown a little arrogant.

…Morgan had destroyed that arrogance.

She had been the first Master he crossed swords with, and not just any Master at that. The heiress of the great clan Valor was at the absolute pinnacle of what an Ascended could be. Being utterly crushed by her in less than forty seconds had hit him like a bucket of cold water, instantly extinguishing whatever nascent hubris Sunny could have developed.

Her oppressively flawless skill, her overwhelming physical prowess, her crystal-clear killing intent… all of it made a lasting impression on him.

Sunny had returned with two valuable gifts from that battle. The first was a breakthrough in his mastery of Shadow Dance. The second was a stark reminder of how many crouching tigers there were among the Awakened. Yes, he was outstanding and powerful… but he was not the only outstanding, powerful person out there.

Ever since that battle, Sunny had been instinctively comparing every Master he fought with Morgan.

So far, no one had made the cut — not in the waking world, not in the Dream Realm, and not in the Second Nightmare.

Which was why he was very curious to see how he would compare to her now that they were both Ascended.

Sunny was not the same person who had met Morgan in the Dreamscape. He had lived through too many tribulations since then — the Night Temple, the Red Colosseum, the gauntlet of nightmares, the Temple of the Chalice, the Ivory City… and the Antarctic Center, from the quiet dread of LO49 to the cold despair of Falcon Scott.

Each of these trials had left scars on his soul, but also made him a much more experienced and deadly fighter.

'That is true…'

But Morgan must not have remained stagnant, either. Saint Tyris had once said the Anvil's daughter was too young and inexperienced to challenge the Third Nightmare… which had to mean that she had been actively earning the necessary experience all that time.

So, this spar of theirs was bound to be interesting.

"Sure. I was looking forward to it."

She nodded with satisfaction, then gestured for Cassie to take a seat. Then, Morgan walked to a case containing a multitude of training swords — all fashioned to withstand the intense pressure of being wielded by Masters, and thus insanely expensive — and looked at them thoughtfully.

"What weapon would you prefer to use? Swords, spears, something

more exotic? Not weapons at all, perhaps? Oh… I forgot to ask. Are you going to be fighting as is, or assume that pseudo-transformation of yours?"

It did not seem like she particularly cared, as if it was of no concern whether she would face a human or a towering fiend.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then shook his head.

"No transformation. It only serves as a force multiplier… if the underlying skill is not there, using it is pointless. Not to mention a drain on the essence. I mostly activate it when there are too many enemies around, to reap the benefit of having four arms. As for the weapon…"

He pulled on a shadow cast by a support pillar and formed it into a blunt, featureless black tachi.

"That would be enough."

Morgan smiled.

"Neat trick."

With that, she took a simple straight training sword from the case and walked to the center of the dojo. Stopping there, she pierced Sunny with a sharp look of her vibrant vermilion eyes.

"I would have suggested using our Aspect Abilities freely, but that would probably destroy a large part of this level of the compound. So, sadly, we will have to limit ourselves to our Dormant and Awakened powers. I hope you don't mind."

Sunny shrugged.

He did not mind. It would have been a shame if he had not learned what Morgan's Ascended Ability was already, but he had — in fact, he not only observed her for more than a month and came up with a solid theory, but had also asked Cassie for confirmation.

The blind girl was now able to see both the Attributes and the Aspect Abilities of those near her, after all. She was a priceless source of

information... an almost limitless well of it, really. Thanks to her, Sunny now knew a lot about many people, including the likes of Whispering Blade and Beastmaster.

With Cassie's help, Sunny had finally confirmed without a shadow of a doubt that those of the Valor bloodline — Anvil and his children, at least — carried the lineage of War God in their veins.

As for Morgan's Aspect Abilities…

Her Dormant Ability allowed her to passively enhance the sharpness of anything she touched. Her Awakened Ability was a comprehensive physical augmentation with an emphasis on resilience — basically, her body could become as durable as tempered steel.

Her Ascended Ability was a strange one, though. It allowed her to assimilate enchantments into her body and soul, inheriting their effects. As a Master, the number of enchantments she could absorb was limited to three, and they could be switched freely for different ones at any point in time.

Considering how powerful, versatile, and unpredictable such an Ability was, Sunny was more than willing to forego using Ascended Abilities today.

Standing opposite of each other, the two of them studied the opponent for a while in silence. Sunny was remembering the thirty-six seconds he had managed to hold out against Morgan the last time they fought.

Morgan was probably studying his posture and expression, as well as replaying the scenes from the battle against the titanic horde in her mind.

After all, she didn't know that this was not the first time the two of them faced each other holding swords in their hands.

…Slowly, a smile of anticipation appeared on Morgan's beautiful face.

Her vermilion eyes glinted, and her crimson lips parted, revealing pearly white teeth.

"Prepare yourself, Master Sunless…"

Sunny almost rolled his eyes.

'Is there really a need to announce her atta…'

He did not get to finish that thought, however.

Suddenly, Morgan was beside him, and her sword was falling down like the inescapable blade of a guillotine.

Chapter-1136: Friendly Duel

Morgan moved fast… much faster than she had moved in the Dreamscape. One moment she was standing calmly a dozen meters away from him, the next she was already there, delivering a downward cut aimed precisely at his temple.

Luckily, Sunny was prepared for her.

He sidesteps, raising his shadow tachi to intercept the training sword. The two blades met and bit into each other, connected in a bind. He felt the shock of the impact travel through his bones and pushed the sword away — at the same moment as Morgan raised her hands, changing the angle of her weapon and pushing it forward over the tachi.

The tip of the training sword barely missed his eye.

But now, momentum was on Sunny's side.

He took a step forward, past their two blades, and rammed her with his shoulder. Morgan was thrown back, and a split second later, it was her turn to deflect a cut… only the cut had never come.

Instead of trying to twirl his tachi into a downward cut that was not too different from the one his opponent had delivered a moment ago, Sunny simply kept its position — raised above his shoulder, the blade facing back — and struck her in the face with the pommel.

No matter how fast Morgan was, no matter how strong, the distance between them was too short, and that strike was too swift — better yet, the blade of the tachi remained between his neck and the enemy's sword.

Sunny saw no way for her to escape.

And… she didn't.

Instead of awkwardly trying to avoid the strike, Morgan simply lowered her head and received it with the ridge of her brow, where the bone was strongest. She didn't seem phased by the powerful blow, either. In fact, Sunny felt as if he had struck steel… he almost heard a metallic ring.

The two of them pushed away from each other, ending that first, probing exchange.

Sunny was pleased with himself.

…Morgan seemed pleased, too.

A wide smile bloomed on her face. She briefly touched her forehead, then glanced at her fingers, where a drop of blood was smeared across her alabaster skin. The smile turned into a grin.

"Wonderful. Simply wonderful. Nephis, Cassie, and you… I've been starved of good opponents for so long, and now there are three. And you are all so different, as well!"

She looked like a starving glutton who suddenly found himself choosing between three exquisite dishes.

Sunny raised an eyebrow and glanced at the blind girl, who sat quietly by the wall of the dojo.

'What, that battle maniac got Cassie involved in her training regime, too?'

Noticing his gaze, Morgan chuckled.

"Cassia might not be the strongest Master out there, but in terms of pure technique, she is among the best. And with how potent her precognition is… fighting her made me exercise skills and muscles that I had never had to exercise before. Which is a rare boon, for me. Why? Have the two of you never fought?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then shook his head.

"No. Not with swords, at least."

Morgan gave him a curious look.

"Ah… it's your loss."

She raised her sword and prepared to launch another strike. Her smile turned from charming to dangerous.

"I won't hold back, then."

With that, Morgan attacked, turning into a furious whirlwind of steel.

'Curses…'

Sunny had been pleased with his performance in their first exchange, but his satisfaction quickly evaporated. Now that Morgan was done testing him, the onslaught of attacks she unleashed was... simply unreasonable.

In terms of raw physical strength and speed, the two of them were about equal — granted, Sunny was only using three of his shadows to augment himself. He would have had an advantage if he used all five. But then again, his enemy was probably holding something back, too.

In terms of technique, combat intelligence, and experience… to his deep dissatisfaction, Sunny realized that he was still inferior to the Princess of War in that regard.

He had already known that Morgan's skill was near-flawless, honed into a perfect tool by decades of practice and chilling killing intent. She was the epitome of what a Legacy was supposed to be — a person born and raised for the sole purpose of being a fighter. The people who forged her into a deadly weapon were some of the best warriors humanity had to offer, as well.

Subjected to Morgan's inescapable sword, he felt… suffocated.

Back in the Dreamscape, he had been simply crushed. He had felt as if his enemy was not a person, but a hurricane. The thirty-six seconds he had lasted against her seemed like a miracle.

Today, the situation was different. Sunny was at a disadvantage, but he could confidently defend himself. He was older, stronger, and more experienced… his mastery of Shadow Dance had improved a lot, too.

That said… the problem was…

'What the… the hell… she is insane!'

Although Morgan's battle style was too sophisticated and strangely elusive to be absorbed by him in a short amount of time, he did manage to glean a few things about it — enough to be able to predict the general flow of her movements.

However, that flow was flawless, entirely devoid of any vulnerability he could exploit. What was the point of knowing her moves in advance if he couldn't do anything about it? She fought in a way that left him with no choices. It was as though there was a steel cage around him, and its sharp bars were slowly constricting. Soon enough, he would be caught and cut into pieces by them.

Sunny knew that if the enemy had no vulnerabilities, the best way to defeat them was to create some. So, he tried to lure Morgan into several insidious traps — to no avail. She seemed to see straight through them, solving the puzzles he presented in an instant.

Even all this time later…

She was still like an insurmountable obstacle for him. The savage, but simultaneously chillingly calculating deadliness of her perfectly lethal skill was like a work of art.

Its theme was war, violence, and destruction, and Sunny was both the subject and the sole member of the audience for whom that art was being created.

As well as its victim.

At that moment, he realized something…

Sunny realized that this was the worst possible way for him to fight someone like Morgan.

Direct confrontation, contests of strength and skill… all of that was not his battlefield. The most dire battles Sunny had fought, he won with cunning and guile. He employed underhanded tricks, used every single resource available to him in unexpected ways, and tore victories from the claws of fate through sheer force of will and boundless spitefulness.

He was good in a fight, of course. Much better than most. But while being a sharp sword was an important conduit of his will, it was not what made him truly deadly.

'What a… fine realization…'

The question was — how could he turn this duel around and push it toward a direction where he held the advantage? There were ways to overcome Morgan's furious, cold, suffocating might, surely.

A more important question, though…

Was if he even wanted to.

Chapter-1137: Loser's Game

Up until now, both Sunny and Morgan had acted relatively tame.

It might not have looked like it from the side, considering how fierce and vicious a battle of two Ascended inevitably appeared. Masters possessed superhuman speed, strength, and resilience. A clash between them would look like a collision of two natural forces to a mundane person, and a mundane building would be swiftly destroyed should it become an arena for it.

Which was why the dojo they were fighting in was lined with durable armored plates, and the training sword Morgan was using cost a fortune.

…Nevertheless, they were holding back.

Not even considering the fact that the two of them had agreed to forgo using their Ascended Abilities, Sunny had yet to make use of Shadow Step. Morgan had not made her weapon sharper, either, preferring to rely on pure technique.

It was as though both of them had silently decided to make this spar a contest of skill… for now.

Which was actually a disadvantage for Sunny. The fewer resources he had at his disposal, the more restrained he felt. Morgan, on the other hand, seemed to only ever need one resource — her sword.

In fact, even that was not necessary. Her body itself was the sword, capable of cutting through tempered steel without hindrance.

So, if Sunny wanted to turn things around, he needed the situation to change, pushing their duel into the next stage.

However, he wasn't sure if he wanted to.

'...What is my goal here?'

He had been curious to compare his strength with Morgan's. He had been given little choice but to accept her request, as well. He naturally wanted to win.

But was a victory really in his best interest?

Now that Sunny was being closely observed by the great clans, there was no possibility of not drawing their attention. Which was why he had decided to accept that fact and settle for creating a very specific impression of himself instead of trying to remain unseen.

Sunny wanted both Valor and Song to think of him as someone strong, exceptional even… but not too exceptional, and not too strong. They had to think of him as a powerful, but crude upstart — a talented outskirt rat that had achieved a lot, and had the potential to achieve even more… but not much more.

As someone who could be predicted and controlled.

Considering all that, did he really want to defeat Morgan?

Could he even defeat her?

'Well… of course, I can.'

Saint, Nightmare, Imp, and Serpent were also part of his power. Morgan possessed a great number of mighty Echoes, but those had come from outside of her Aspect — the Shadows, on the contrary, had come from within Sunny's.

Which meant that he would obliterate her in a contest of unadulterated personal power… which did not matter, really, since such contests never happened in real life. There were always other components involved.

The Transcendent Echoes might have been external to Morgan's own power, but they would rip Sunny apart just as well.

'No… I don't really want to best Morgan today. What I really need to do is lose in a way that will make it easier for me to gain access to

her secrets. So, lose in a way that would leave her wanting for more.'

Being a personal sparring partner of the heir of the great clan Valor was a dangerous position to be in — not the least because Morgan could potentially learn much more about Sunny than he would have liked her to — but it was also the best position to be in for a spy.

Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer…

Sunny frowned for a moment.

'Isn't this the same reasoning Nephis used to justify her decision to join Valor?'

Maybe it was… but he did not really care. Many things had changed since then, including Sunny himself and the situation he was in.

'Alright, then… let's do this.'

He deflected another of Morgan's blows, evaded her follow-up strike — three of them, actually, all chained into one predatory, fluid motion — and raised an eyebrow.

"...Should we take it up a notch?"

She took a step forward, sent her sword flying toward his throat with diabolical speed, and smiled pleasantly.

"Let's."

Sunny sidestepped her strike and nodded.

Then, his technique instantly changed.

Before, he was using a fluid mix of various simple styles he had picked up over the years. Such a patchwork technique did not excel in any one thing in particular, but was flexible and hard to predict.

Sunny had held to his best cards, though, unwilling to share them with the enemy… a potential enemy, at least. Broken Sword's style that Nephis had taught him, Saint's grounded technique that had originated from the legions of Nether, the battle art of Solvane's

zealots, which had come from the warmaidens of the Red Sect — those, he had hidden within himself.

Now that he wanted to lose in the most interesting fashion, though…

'What would really intrigue a battle maniac like Morgan?'

She had faced and defeated all kinds of Awakened, and had learned all manner of battle styles, no doubt. Her collection was probably even larger than Sunny's own…

So what technique could he show that was both exceptional and fascinating — and, most importantly, unknown to Morgan?

One particular style came to mind.

It was one that he had learned by chance… not from Awakened, Ascended, or even Saints, but from Nightmare Creatures. The primeval hunters that had emerged from the Gate near Rain school, wielding weapons made of flint.

After all, if anything could capture the attention of an obsessed connoisseur of swordsmanship and all things related to combat like Morgan, it was a technique that might have had just lain at the root of all techniques, all styles.

Sunny's movements changed, shifting from fluid and refined to uncomplicated and brutal. His whole demeanor changed, too.

The savage technique of the Barrow Wraiths was straightforward and rudimentary, but there was a primal lethality to its clear, callous barbarity. It was the expression of a pure, unclouded intent to kill — simple, but in no way crude. There was nothing about it to dilute the ruthless resolve of a hunter who sought to slaughter his prey in the most direct, efficient way possible.

Sunny remembered the desperate fight in front of the Nightmare Gate and attacked, cruelly aiming to slice through Morgan's hamstrings.

'Let's see how this goes…'

Chapter-1138: Suffering from Success

It went well.

Sunny was not doing much better against the murderous hurricane of steel wearing the beautiful human face of Morgan of Valor… but he did manage to slow her down a little.

Morgan slowed down not because she felt pressured by his sudden change of techniques, but because she was fascinated by it.

Her raven-black hair swept back and her simple tunic rippling from the wind risen by their clash, she pierced him with a burning vermilion gaze. Her red lips moved:

"Interesting. Very interesting…"

Morgan was not addressing Sunny, but more so speaking to herself.

After that, she changed her strategy, as well. Before, Morgan was all offense, all sharp edges, and a relentless barrage of calculated, but devastating strikes. Now, she was moving more deliberately — not really holding back, but also not pursuing an overwhelming defeat of the enemy at all costs.

It was as if Morgan was afraid to break him too soon.

…Sunny did not really know how to feel about that.

'Huh… well, that's a new feeling…'

They clashed, their swords weaving a cacophonous, but strangely beautiful melody of hissing and clangor. At the side of the dojo, Cassie turned her head slightly, listening.

Sunny had long beaten his record of holding out against Morgan for thirty-six seconds. A minute passed, then another. He was still solidly standing on his two feet, and even though his breathing was growing a little labored from the terrible strain of the intense fight, his stamina was far from running out.

In the middle of a particularly furious exchange, when they were close to each other, Morgan suddenly asked:

"That style… who taught you?"

Sunny struck at the hilt of her sword, aiming to sever her fingers, and answered hoarsely:

"No one taught me. I just learned it… from a Nightmare Creature…"

She easily avoided his strike and punished it by aiming a thrust at his heart. A smile appeared on her face.

"...In the Nightmare?"

Sunny hesitated, considering how much he could reveal. He had fought the Barrow Wraiths as Mongrel, after all… but then again, no one else had gotten a proper measure of their battle skill, and he had faced countless Nightmare Gates later in Antarctica, most of them undocumented.

"No, in front of a Nightmare Gate."

Morgan's smile widened.

"You're a fast learner, then…"

She seemed to have gotten a good grasp on the essence of the primal battle style he was using, which translated into her attacks becoming more purposeful. She was probing and testing, forcing him to reveal more facets of the technique… all of them, ideally.

Which did not quite suit Sunny. It was too soon — he could not have her growing bored yet. He needed to impress her some more before losing, so that the impression he made lasted.

Without giving Morgan any warning, he commanded his shadow tachi to change in the middle of a swing. The shadow flowed, turning into a great jian. It was still a two-handed sword, but this one was straight and double-edged, much more suitable for thrusts, slightly more versatile, and supremely mobile.

The swing staggered unexpectedly and turned into a thrust, catching Morgan by surprise. She moved with the grace of a dancer, pulling her head out of the way. A strand of wavy black hair was cut and glided through the air.

"Ah! Devious!"

Despite the outraged tone, her vibrant eyes were shining with excitement.

Technically, Sunny had just cheated — they had agreed to leave their Ascended Abilities unused, after all.

But that was fine. Cheating was exactly what an exalted Legacy would expect an outskirt rat to do…

And honestly, it was also what a person from the outskirts would actually do.

It was also what a fighter in a real battle would not shy away from, which was why Sunny thought that Morgan was bound to enjoy his little twist.

Instead of answering, he attacked, turning his jian into a spear.

There were a few weapon forms that he had trained creating well enough to summon them on the fly… the only one he had reasons to avoid was the odachi, since that was what he had used the last time he fought Morgan.

Her smile grew wider.

They fought, putting the armored plates of the dojo under more and more strain. At some point, one of them even started to crack. Sunny used it to his advantage, launching a deliberate strike while his opponent was slightly less sure-footed.

Pushing the tip of her spear aside, Morgan pivoted, shifting her weight to one leg…

The other suddenly whipped into the air, delivering a lightning-fast, picture-perfect roundhouse kick to his head.

Sunny barely had time to react, pulling the spear slightly back and raising its butt to solidly block the kick with the shaft.

Morgan's alabaster shin connected with the matte black surface of the shadow spear…

And cut straight through it, as if it was not as strong as an Ascended weapon would be. Sunny's eyes widened slightly.

'Crap…'

It seemed that Morgan had decided to start using more of her Aspect Abilities, as well.

There was nothing really for him to do but accept the blow and hope that she was not planning to decapitate him.

The kick had lost none of its power after cutting the spear. The moment Morgan's foot connected with his jaw, it was as if he had been hit by a siege ram. Sunny momentarily saw stars. He was thrown aside and staggered, barely managing to maintain some semblance of balance.

'Not good… no... actually, very good! This is exactly what I wanted. Time to be defeated…'

He overplayed his disorientation a little and waited for the follow-up strike to come.

But it didn't.

When Sunny regained the ability to see clearly a second later, he saw a hint of guilt on Morgan's face. She was looking at him with a resigned expression.

"Ah, damn it… sorry, I forgot myself for a moment. I have a healer at

hand…"

Then, she paused and stared at him with a slightly startled expression. It was strange to see Morgan surprised.

"You're… you're not cut?"

Sunny rubbed his cheek, which was still numb. He was going to have a nasty bruise, that was for sure. But the Marble Shell seemed to have withstood Morgan's Aspect Ability.

No, not quite… she had probably released the Ability after slicing through the spear. But her Flaw — what Sunny suspected to be her Flaw — remained.

He grimaced, then moved his jaw side to side and answered in an even tone:

"No. Why would I be cut? Do I look fragile? Well, I'm not. I'm quite sturdy, in fact."

Morgan stared at him for a bit, a strange expression on her face. Eventually, her lips twisted into a light smile.

"That you are. I'll remember that… for our next spar. This one, sadly, has to come to an end. Thank you for a wonderful duel, Master Sunless."

She glanced at her training sword, then calmly turned around and went to place it back in the case.

Sunny rubbed his cheek again, feeling a bit of dull pain seep through the numbness, and looked at her back.

'Seems like it worked. That… is what I call a job well done. Beautifully, really. Ah… I guess that is what they call suffering from success…'

Chapter-1139: Limitations

The spar with Morgan left Sunny feeling sore and contemplative. The soreness quickly dissipated thanks to his Ascended physique and the Shroud of Dusk, but the ponderous mood remained.

Some time later, he was sitting in his small office, ignoring the paperwork he had to fill out in favor of idly staring at the wall.

That fight of theirs was not exactly illuminating, but it had provided him with a lot of food for thought.

First of all, Sunny was reminded of what true Legacies represented. Over the years, he had forgotten the feeling of awe and reverence mundane people had toward the distant, powerful Legacy Clans — the austere warrior caste that produced the best and most valiant champions of humanity. That existed solely for battling the Nightmare Spell… or was supposed to, at least.

He couldn't be blamed — Sunny had grown immensely strong himself and had crossed paths with all kinds of powerful creatures, from ancient Saints to Titans. He had even brushed against actual divinities like Weaver, Nether, and Hope. It was not surprising that the fearsome reputation of the Legacies faded a bit in comparison.

But the Legacy Clans, and especially the three Great Clans, were still authorities in terms of personal power and combat prowess. They were in no way inferior to the ancient Awakened of the past, and in fact seemed to be superior in many ways… the most important ways.

Legacies — and all modern Awakened by extension — were much harsher, much more extreme, and much better tempered than those from the ancient times.

That was because the Legacy Clans were forged in a much more hellish world. They had risen to resist the Nightmare Spell, and were

shaped into a force to be reckoned with by its terrible pressure.

Morgan had reminded Sunny about that.

It was no coincidence that the two most dangerous people he knew — Nephis and Mordret — were products of the Legacy culture. Among the three of them, it was Sunny who was an outlier.

Which brought him to the second avenue of thought… his own power. Sunny would have lied to himself if he said that he wasn't upset about his loss. Even though he understood that a good defeat was much more beneficial as far as his goals were concerned, a small and unreasonable part of his mind still desired to win.

No one liked to lose, and Sunny especially hated the thought of losing to a member of a Great Clan. He deeply resented them, after all… being defeated by someone he disdained was a bitter pill to swallow.

But swallow it he did.

It was one thing to pretend to be weak in front of Morgan, but the truth of the matter was that she was simply too strong — even the current Sunny, with all his advantages, would find it hard to contend with that level of strength in a direct confrontation.

And while he was resourceful and had ways of avoiding such a confrontation, Morgan had all the boundless resources of Clan Valor behind her, as well.

So, even in that regard, she was a dire threat.

Sunny remembered what Jet had told him once, years ago…

'No one survives in the Dream Realm alone.'

Her words had always held true, but now they seemed especially poignant. Sunny had grown powerful — much more powerful than he ever imagined being. But he was still just one man. In front of a collective like a great clan, his personal power seemed insignificant.

Worse still, that collective served as a gatekeeper to greater strength. No one could even become a Saint without their permission — unless

that person wanted to be hunted down and slain in retaliation for their defiance.

…There were ways to grow more powerful without achieving Transcendence, though.

The last thing the spar with Morgan made Sunny think about was the duel itself. He slowly replayed it in his mind, considering what he could have done better and what mistakes he could have avoided.

The list was both endless and pointless. Everything was easier in hindsight — it was achieving the best result in the moment that was hard.

Still, it was good to review his performance, as well as that of his enemy.

Sunny spent some time staring at the wall and thinking back to the duel.

'A jian was not a good choice for that strike… here I did not need to saturate that group of muscles with essence, it was just a waste… should have anticipated the effect of the kick better…'

As he analyzed their fight, his thoughts inevitably drifted to what could have been done differently.

'I wonder how Morgan would have fared against me if I used the Shadow Shell…'

Sunny tried to construct such a fight in his mind, replacing himself with a version that was three meters high and possessed four arms. Would Morgan have still held an advantage? Not in physical prowess, that was for sure.

However, he was not certain if the outcome would have been different… Legacies were first and foremost abomination slayers, after all. Anvil's daughter had been trained to face all kinds of Nightmare Creatures since childhood. A four-armed fiend would not phase her at all.

'...What about some other shell?'

Sunny was currently limited to one form — that of the shadowspawn — because that was what he knew best. But, in theory, he could create the shell of any creature. He just needed to know the creature well enough… perfectly, in fact. And that was not easy to achieve.

A thoughtful frown appeared on his face.

'Is it true, though? That I can create the shell of any creature?'

It was true in theory, but that theory broke instantly when faced with reality. Take Morgan, for example, or any other human for that matter… creating a shell a human had to be easier, because Sunny was one himself and knew how human bodies operated perfectly well.

But how would that even work? The shadowspawn shell worked because the four-armed fiend was much larger than Sunny, and thus, he could form its body around his own.

But other humans, with rare exceptions, were more or less of the same approximate size as him. There was no space for a human shell to be formed.

There were creatures smaller than humans, too. The current Ravenous Fiend, for example — even if Sunny studied his Shadow for a while, he wouldn't be able to create a shell of the little critter.

So, in reality, the Shadow Shell was limited in what it could recreate.

…A strange expression suddenly appeared on Sunny's face.

He blinked a couple of times.

'Unless…'

Chapter-1140: Staring at the Wall

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then chuckled.

"No... that's crazy! It would never work."

Then, he stared at the wall some more.

…Would it?

'No way.'

The thought that had crept into his mind while he was thinking about the limitations of the Shadow Shell was so out there that it seemed utterly ridiculous. But the more he thought about it… the fewer reasons to discard it he saw.

'No, that's… that's a bit too strange, even for me.'

And yet, he could not find a logical reason for why it wouldn't be true.

Sunny hesitated for a while longer, then furtively looked around.

Then, he cleared his throat, stood up, and left the office.

If he wanted to test this bizarre theory, he needed to do it somewhere more private.

He left the Valor compound and made his way to the nearby dormitory, where most of the government staff still remaining within the siege capital lived. There, he entered his living quarters — which were a bit more spacious and had better amenities than that of both mundane and Awakened government workers — and locked the door behind him.

Being an Ascended had its perks.

Sunny sent his four shadows to stand watch — two outside the apartment, two within — and stood there for a few minutes, mentally going over what he was about to do.

It didn't seem to be dangerous, just… really weird.

The principle was simple.

Sunny had mastered three steps of Shadow Dance to date. The essence of his battle art was shapelessness and formlessness — it allowed him to shadow an enemy, copying the very essence of their combat technique. After doing so, he could predict their movements, the flow of their battle intent, and even their thoughts.

The first step allowed him to shadow simpler battle styles. He had achieved that breakthrough while fighting Nephis in the Crimson Spire.

The second step vastly elevated his comprehension of the fundamental principles that governed all battle techniques, allowing him to shadow much more sophisticated styles, and do it much faster.

It also gave him a glimpse of an intuitive understanding of the more esoteric components of the truly advanced battle arts — those created and used by the Awakened, thus incorporating special ways of guiding soul essence through one's body.

He had achieved that step after collecting a vast library of techniques in the Dreamscape, which culminated during his first duel with Morgan. The inspiration Sunny had received after being decimated by the Princess of War pushed him to a breakthrough.

The third step… was the hardest one yet. Sunny had started his journey toward mastery of it by expanding his horizons and starting to shadow not only humans, but also Nightmare Creatures.

In the bloody arena of the Red Colosseum, he had submerged himself into their perverted, demented, rabid minds… which allowed him to intuitively feel what the abominations he fought would do, but also put his own sense of self, if not his very soul, at risk.

The third step of Shadow Dance was much more demanding on the practitioner. It required one to truly accept the formless nature of the shadows and let go of their actual self — which, of course, posed the risk of losing it forever. Sunny had made that dangerous breakthrough after being trapped in an endless procession of harrowing dreams by Nightmare and having his personal memories blocked.

In the end, he had pulled the dissipating pieces of his true self back together by using his True Name. It served as an anchor for what made Sunny an individual, and through it, he was able to advance his mastery of Shadow Dance without losing himself.

That third breakthrough enhanced the speed with which he could comprehend the battle intent and combat intelligence of those beings he shadowed even further, allowed him to actually perceive the flow of essence through their bodies as opposed to just feeling it intuitively, and even gave him the ability to sometimes predict their thoughts.

The fourth step…

That was where Sunny had hit the wall. Shadow Dance was his Aspect Legacy, but it was also something he had to invent all on his own, with no one guiding him… as such, he wasn't even sure what the correct path was, let alone how to take the next step on it.

He only felt that the next steps of Shadow Dance went far beyond battle techniques... and would be much, much harder to conceive and master for that reason.

However, while he had stagnated in mastering Shadow Dance, he had achieved progress in other aspects of his personal power.

The culmination of it was the Shadow Shell — a powerful tool he had created by bringing together various facets of his skills, Attributes, and Aspect Abilities.

Shadow Dance also played a role in him being able to create shells of other creatures. In fact, its role was perhaps the most important — without deep comprehension of the desired form, Sunny would never

be able to construct it from the shadows, and that was what his Aspect Legacy allowed him to do.

However, there was a limitation to Shadow Shell.

After all, shadows were truly shapeless and formless, while Sunny was not. Even if he had managed to make his mind supremely malleable, he still possessed a human body. No matter how much training he had put into making it as flexible and adaptable as possible, it was still a relatively rigid thing.

But what if… he added another ingredient to the mix?

Right now, Shadow Shell existed as a combination of his Dormant Ability, Shadow Control, his Ascended Ability, Shadow Manifestation, and his Aspect Legacy, Shadow Dance.

His Awakened Ability — Shadow Step — was missing from the equation.

And that, perhaps, was the reason for the limitations Sunny had to deal with.

'Well… uh… let's just try this.'

If he succeeded… Sunny felt that he might just discover a direction that would eventually lead him to the next step of Shadow Dance.

Breathing in deeply, he activated Shadow Step and dissolved into the shadows.

There, in their dark embrace, Sunny himself was a shadow — formless and shapeless.

But he did not need to be.

While fighting the Ravenous Fiend, he had changed his form in this state to possess sharp claws. His shadow form was, too, infinitely malleable.

So, Sunny concentrated and started to slowly change his shadow form… into the shape of himself.

It was a strange endeavor, to turn himself into a shadow, only to then turn the shadow into himself. But that was exactly what Sunny wanted to do.

It was a bit like constructing the shell of the shadowspawn, only instead of shaping the shadows around his body, Sunny was shaping his body — his shadow body — instead.

Of course, he knew the shape of himself the best. Which was why recreating it was much easier than summoning the fiendish form of the shadowspawn.

Eventually, the incorporeal shadow assumed the form of Sunny's body. It had arms and legs, a torso, fingers and toes, and a face that was a perfect rendition of Sunny's face.

It matched his physical body perfectly — not that it needed to. Starting from becoming himself was just the easiest thing he could do for that test.

Satisfied with the result of the shaping, Sunny spent some time in the dark embrace of the shadows, drifting.

'I wonder...'

Then, he took a deep mental breath, activated Shadow Manifestation…

And manifested himself back into the waking world through it.

Chapter-1141: Self-Actualization

A matte, jet-black version of Sunny was standing in the middle of the room. He did not move for a while, frozen like a statue, then raised his hands slightly and looked at them with a strange expression.

His fingers moved.

'Well, that's…'

The jet-black Sunny scratched the back of his head, then halted for a moment and tentatively touched his hair. The mere fact that he had hair was a surprise.

'...that's certainly something.'

He felt extremely strange.

Sunny was fundamentally a human. When using Shadow Step, he could assume the form of an incorporeal shadow, then turn himself back to his original form. That was not what he had done today, however.

Today, he had become a shadow, and then manifested himself into a corporeal form without turning back into a human. So, what he was right now was… was…

'I… uh… I'll be damned if I know what I am right now.'

A human inhabiting a human-shaped vessel made of shadows? A shadow brazenly wandering the human world in the form of a person? Or something else entirely?

Descriptions aside, his current state was a curious one.

Because of how faithful the recreation was to the original, Sunny felt more or less like himself. His range of motion, strength, and agility

remained the same. His shadow form was Ascended, just like his human body, so it was just as powerful and resilient.

There were differences too, of course.

The most obvious one was the change in his perception. His shadow sense seemed to have become sharper, while his vision was now less pronounced. He couldn't see colors, either — just like in the Second Nightmare, when inhabiting the shadowspawn. This was familiar territory for him.

Less familiar was the actual composition of his new and strange shadow body.

It was a faithful copy, but not an exact one. It couldn't be — although the jet-black Sunny looked and acted like Sunny, he was still a manifested shadow. As such, he operated on a different set of principles.

The recreation did follow some underlying principles of how a corporeal creature was supposed to be, but the similarity was shallow. He did not have a beating heart, or any internal organs, for that matter. And although there was a rough structure to his form, with something similar to bones being connected to something similar muscles, there was no blood running through his veins.

There were no veins, either. At best, there were essence pathways.

How did it all work?

Hell if Sunny knew.

...It did work, though.

Perplexed, he glanced at the two shadows that were hiding in the corners of the room.

"...What do you guys think?"

The haughty shadow seemed completely befuddled. It stared at him for a while, then raised a hand, as if wanting to say something. Eventually, though, the arrogant guy simply shook his head in

confusion.

The creepy shadow, in an uncharacteristic display of emotions, scratched the back of its head, puzzled.

The jet-black Sunny smiled, revealing jet-black teeth.

"Yeah…"

After going through the training steps of Shadow Dance and examining his current state further, he discovered a few things. The first was that this corporeal shadow form was much more malleable than his human body. It could change its shape at will… of course, he needed to possess an excellent understanding of what he was turning it into for the end result to work.

For example, Sunny could become a smaller version of himself — that, however, required some practice to master, since such a fundamental change affected a lot of things. He could become larger, too, although there was a limit to how much, dictated by his Rank and soul essence capacity.

Less comprehensive changes were much easier. Sunny already knew how to possess four arms, so he could add two more to his existing ones with ease. The same went for claws, horns, a tail… in the future, as his knowledge of various forms and shapes grew, he would be able to make more changes like that on the fly.

The second discovery was that while the corporeal shadow form was almost as resilient as his actual body, in the end, it still fell short.

The reason for that was simple — the Weaves. Neither Blood Weave nor Bone Weave persisted in this state, which left Sunny vulnerable. Interestingly enough, the Marble Shell still had an effect… in fact, it had even become more potent.

That was because the effects of the [Stalwart] trait were being applied to him twice.

Shadows were innately connected to souls, to the extent that when Sunny was damaged in the form of a shadow, or one of his shadows was damaged, his soul would be damaged too. Therefore, the

corporeal shadow form received the benefits of both the extremely high degree of physical protection and the high degree of protection from soul attacks that the [Stalwart] trait provided.

Due to the fact that every attack against it was akin to a soul attack.

…Which was not ideal.

Sunny had a tendency to be wounded a lot, and if each wound was transferred directly to his soul, it would quickly collapse.

'No… that really won't do.'

Activating the [Mantle] would surround the physical shadow form with an onyx carapace and make it much less prone to being damaged.

But there was an even better solution…

After all, Sunny had started this whole experiment for a reason.

Even though the discovery promised to have much wider implications, the initial reason was to expand the limits of the Shadow Shell.

After getting somewhat used to this new way of existence, Sunny called upon the deep shadows shrouding his room, manifesting them into the shadowspawn shell.

Layers of shadows flowed up his jet-black body, wrapping tightly around it. Soon, a towering, four-armed fiend was standing in the middle of the room.

This time felt different, though.

Instead of being nestled within the Shell, Sunny felt as if he had become an integral part of it. His own shadow form was still the heart and driving force of the horned creature, but it was as if he had actually become the fiend. The outer layers of the shadowspawn were like armor, and protected safely deep within was his vulnerable soul.

'...Not bad.'

Combining these two abilities was a perfect way to both remove the limitations of the Shadow Shell and protect his soul from harm.

If there was one negative side to this solution, though, it was that Sunny's essence was being consumed at twice the speed.

He would not be able to sustain this double transformation for long.

For now. In the future, though…

As his soul grew more powerful, Sunny would most likely be able to use these abilities much better.

And one day, perhaps, his soul would grow so vast and powerful that he would not need the protection of a shell at all.

Chapter-1142: Tangible Shadow Form

A few days went by in a flash. Nothing serious seemed to have happened, but grand and dire events were being set in motion in the shadows.

Saint Madoc had transported several cohorts of Valor retainers into the Dream Realm and then disappeared. Of course, no one was told about his absence — in fact, Clan Valor made a good show of pretending that he was still around, supporting the Awakened in the Dream Realm.

It was a believable lie.

Awakened, Ascended, and Saints were affected by the Call all the same — if they traveled to the Dream Realm near a Nightmare Gate, they would be brought to the area surrounding the Seed instead of to where their anchor was. However, there was a big difference when a Transcendent was actually involved.

That difference was that Saints could return to the waking world by just using their innate powers, while Awakened and Masters needed to find a Gateway to come back.

Another, no less important distinction was that the pull of the Call was not precise. If an Awakened fell asleep near a Gate, they could be transported right to where the Seed was, but just as easily to a spot dozens of kilometers away. They could even be dropped right into the middle of a horde of hungry Nightmare Creatures.

So, if a cohort of Awakened wanted to use a Nightmare Gate as a pathway to the Dream Realm, they would be scattered over a large area and risk finding their doom long before reuniting with their fellow warriors. A Saint could follow the Call first, establish an

anchor in a safe place, and then transport the members of the cohort there one by one.

A Saint could even clear the way to the Seed, if the cohort was truly planning to challenge it. That was how the Nightmare Gates that opened inside the human cities were usually dealt with, unless there was no one to challenge them — in that case, they were simply contained, surrounded by a fortified exclusion zone, and guarded day and night.

So, everyone had been led to believe that that was exactly what Whispering Blade was doing — guiding the Awakened warriors of Clan Valor to the Seeds of Nightmare in order to conquer them.

Sunny, however, knew better.

He knew that Madoc actually left to infiltrate Song's territory and secretly take out Mordret. The Awakened cohorts the fearsome Saint had transported to the Dream Realm had been left to their own devices, presumably supporting Knight Shtad in pursuing a mysterious objective.

The war between the great clans was starting in earnest. Blood had already been spilled, and much more of it was going to flow very soon.

…Sunny himself, meanwhile, had spent these days experimenting with his newfound ability. He was in a real rush of excitement about it, simply because the potential of the corporeal shadow form was all but limitless.

In theory.

In practice, there were still conditions to what he could do with it.

For example, Sunny managed to turn himself into the shadow fiend without the help of the Shadow Shell, relying solely on his own form — that was more or less the extent of how large he could make himself, though. For now. It was also an inferior solution to calling upon the ambient shadows to become the outer layer of the spawn, since he was vulnerable without them.

He also experimented with becoming smaller. That was a much easier change, although not without its limitations either. The smallest he managed to become was about the size of the Imp, which induced quite a reaction from the little wretch.

Sunny also tried other things, like staying more or less his natural size, but changing various aspects of his appearance. Facial features were easy to shift around, as were other things like the length of his hair, his body type, and so on.

It would have been a great subterfuge tool… if not for the fact that all these permutations were still of a matte, jet-black color.

'I won't be masquerading as other people any time soon…'

Of course, his experiments went beyond cosmetic changes. His interest was mostly combat and stealth, after all. So, Sunny started by adding two more arms to the corporeal shadow form, and transitioned to more extreme shape alterations from there.

His ability to shapeshift was limited by his knowledge and experience. Sunny did well with smaller alterations, like adding sharp claws to his fingers or turning his teeth into wicked fangs.

However, when he tried to grow wings, the result was borderline disastrous — he had never lived with wings on his back, did not know their anatomy and how it engaged with the rest of the body, and had the vaguest understanding of the principles of flight.

So, he had no hope of soaring in the sky like Kai or Saint Tyris any time soon.

Sunny was far away from becoming truly shapeless and formless. He did come closer to reaching that goal, though.

…The funniest thing he did, however, was fulfill his old desire to become taller.

Granted, it too was not easy.

When Sunny simply made himself larger, the proportions of his body seemed a bit off. When he elongated his limbs, the result was even

more off-putting. Finding the right balance was really hard.

He did manage to achieve an acceptable result, though, and was currently looking at himself through one of the shadows, giggling.

"Damn… it's such a pity Effie can't see me right now. The look on her face would be priceless! Especially since she would be looking up at me… oh gods, I can just imagine it…"

The tall version of Sunny was really weird. He wasn't sure that he liked its lanky silhouette that much… it was really amusing to see, though. Especially because the corporeal shadow form was entirely matte black.

Except for the hair. His hair was actually white, because Sunny had summoned the Autumn Leaf to see if it worked on him in this state.

'I should probably explore purchasing more cosmetic Memories in the future… they seem to be working on this form, which can be of use.'

He glanced at himself one last time, then dove back into the shadows and emerged from them in his usual human form. Truth be told, while being a manifested shadow was certainly fun, he felt much more comfortable in his real body.

It was nice, cozy, and familiar.

He felt really rather attached to it.

Some time later, Sunny was preparing to go to sleep, but then suddenly froze in the middle of washing up. His face grew cold and dark.

Then, a dangerous smile appeared on his lips.

'Well, well. What do we have here…'

A frightening darkness flooded his eyes.

That was because a few moments ago, Sunny had felt something.

Before, his perception had been split between five points of view —

his own and those of his four shadows.

But then, a sixth perspective slowly came into focus.

Which meant that the fifth shadow had returned.

The gloomy shadow was now within the walls of the siege capital, and that meant that the assassins Clan Song had sent were here, too.

Chapter-1143: Collateral Damage

Sir Amiran, one of the exalted Knights of the great clan Valor, was standing on top of a newly constructed dormitory tower, looking at the expanse of the city below. There was a long stretch of industrial buildings between him and the looming barrier of the defensive wall that protected the siege capital from the ravages of the Chain of Nightmares.

There were plenty of civilian shelters and dormitories, too — with the start of the evacuation, even industrial areas like this one had been put to use, accommodating numerous refugees.

The refugees were moving far below him like tiny ants. The thunderous booms of firing railguns did not seem to spoil their moods… after months of continuous siege, the people must have grown used to its clamor.

Knight Amiran grimaced.

"...Collateral damage will be high."

But that was war. None of these people would have had to die if the enemy had abided by the agreement to keep the hostilities away from the cities, but now that the Song clan had made their move, the hands of noble warriors of Valor were tied.

The lives of mundane humans were like water, anyway. No matter how much he sacrificed to achieve victory, it was just a drop in the ocean. Amiran didn't feel happy about the human cost of his inevitable victory, but he was also not particularly sad.

Knowing what he knew, their deaths were insignificant.

He heard light footsteps behind him and looked over his shoulder. One of his Awakened approached, bearing news. There was an expression of dark excitement on her face.

"We have confirmed the location, sir."

He nodded.

The band of Song's assassins had infiltrated the siege capital with one of the supply convoys. The original staff had been slain, and the imposters assumed their identities. After getting past the gates, they disappeared into the chaos of the overpopulated city without a trace.

…Or so they thought.

In truth, Valor had long anticipated this attack. The subterfuge the assassins employed was pointless. They had only managed to enter the city because that was where Lady Morgan wanted them.

It would have been easier and much more bloodless to deal with the servants of the Queen of Worms at the gates, but then some of them could escape. So, they were allowed to enter deeper into the trap.

And now, Knight Amiran was entrusted with the honor of delivering Valor's retribution upon the wretched cowards.

What did it matter if there was collateral damage?

He turned around and glanced at the valiant Awakened gathered on the roof. With warriors like these fighting by his side, the dogs of Song stood no chance.

A cold smile appeared on Amiran's lips.

"Prepare, then. We strike as soon as they make their move."

***

In a dark and empty production hall of a decommissioned underground factory, a group of people were sitting around a ghostly fire. Its flames were blue, and burned without producing any smoke. A pleasant fragrance was spreading from the fire, but the gathered

people did not seem to notice.

The leader of the group was a woman wearing simple civilian clothes, with a pale scar crossing her otherwise beautiful face. She was Ascended Morrow, a retainer of the great clan Song.

Currently, Morrow was listening to quiet scratching sounds that seemed to be coming from somewhere under the floor of the factory.

The faces of the Awakened around her were a little tense.

There was a newcomer among them — a man in the uniform of the Evacuation Army — that listened to the sounds, too, his eyes growing a little wide. He was their contact within the siege capital.

After a few moments of silence, the man spoke:

"That thing… it's not going to break free, is it?

Ascended Morrow smiled.

"Of course, it will. When I command it."

She lingered for a second, and then added:

"Have no worry, though. The thralls of Sister Beastmaster are very obedient. Granted, this one is more powerful than her usual pets."

The man chuckled wryly.

"Ah, I see. Good, then."

Poor fool did not even know that he, too, was one of the thralls.

"Anyway, have your people completed the preparations?"

The soldier hesitated for a bit, then pointed at the map being projected by his communicator:

"Yes… that tunnel right there. It will be empty for about twenty-four hours starting from now. As you can see, my lady, the tunnel stretches all the way to the inner city without crossing any other major logistical hubs. It is also wide enough to transport the… that

thing you brought… to where you need it. The last few kilometers leading up to the Valor compound are too well-guarded, though."

Morrow shook her head.

"Leave that to us. Worst case scenario, we will be forced to unleash the thrall a few minutes earlier than planned and let it tear its way toward the compound above ground. Summer Knight won't be able to make it back from the wall in time. And since Whispering Blade seems to have indeed gone to the Dream Realm… the casualties the creature will cause Valor will be severe."

She would have loved nothing more than to slaughter the ignoble hypocrites serving the King of Swords personally, but sadly, her mission was simply to deliver Beastmaster's present to Morgan of Valor, striking both at the enemy's troops and reputation.

After all, what kind of incompetent fool would allow a Nightmare Creature to rampage in the middle of their city?

The man cleared his throat.

"Ah… but I must warn you, my lady. The Awakened of Clan Valor seemed restless recently. A few cohorts vanished without a trace. I don't think that we've been made… but it's better not to linger."

Ascended Morrow studied his face for a while, then nodded.

"Sound advice. We were going to wait until Summer Knight engages with the Terror that is approaching the city, but our diviner has turned ineffective all of a sudden. With this added uncertainty, it is better to accelerate the plan."

She glanced at her Awakened and smiled.

"Time to act, my kin. Prepare to enter the tunnel. You two, go relay my order to those watching the creature. They need to get it ready for transportation as soon as possible. We are moving to attack…"

***

On the first floor of the dormitory tower, Knight Amiran was

surrounded by the Awakened warriors of Valor. One of them was making a report:

"The enemy seems to have started moving. They must be aiming to enter the network of logistical tunnels under the city… if they do, catching them all would be problematic."

Amiran nodded.

"Indeed. The wretches can't be allowed to burrow deeper underground. No, we need to force them to the surface. Get ready to attack. We'll blast through the factory roof and slaughter them all!"

***

There was a shadow watching him say these words.

There was a shadow watching Ascended Morrow give orders to the assassins, as well.

Some distance away, Sunny sighed and gulped down what was left of his coffee. Then, he thanked the owner of a refugee cafe, rose, and walked out, yawning lazily.

It was time for him to begin, too.

Chapter-1144: Theater of Shadows

In the decommissioned underground factory, the ghostly fire had been extinguished. Dozens of Awakened were moving, preparing to depart. All of them had summoned luminous Memories, and the dancing lights made the shadows populating the vast production hall reluctantly retreat.

Ascended Morrow was standing in front of a sturdy wall, looking at it with a somber expression. Eventually, she nodded and glanced at one of her subordinates:

"This is the spot. Isolate it."

The Awakened nodded and raised his hands. Soon, a strange silence fell upon them. It was not the mundane kind of silence many Memories could create, though — instead, it was the manifestation of an Ability that could cut a stretch of space from the rest of the world, subduing all tremors and sounds that would escape it.

The city was constantly being monitored by countless seismic sensors on account of Nightmare Creatures often burrowing underground, so nothing less would do if they wanted to remain unnoticed.

Satisfied, Morrow raised a hand and clicked her fingers. A moment later, a violent sonic boom resounded, and a large portion of the wall in front of her shattered into dust. Behind it, an entrance to a tunnel was revealed, drowned in darkness.

Cold wind entered the production hall, making the Awakened shiver. Even Morrow herself suddenly felt uneasy, for whatever reason. With a frown, she lowered her hand and said evenly:

"Clear the debris. The entrance should be wide enough for the cage to

fit. Second Cohort, scout out the tunnel and make sure that there are no blockages there."

Seven Awakened jumped down into the darkness, while the rest of her subordinates got busy preparing the hole she created for the creature's cage. The cohort in charge of keeping an eye on the abominations was going to bring it any minute now… lowering the massive containment device down would not be easy, but they had come prepared.

The man in the uniform of the Evacuation Army watched the process with a worried face. After a minute, he cleared his throat awkwardly:

"Well, I… I will be going, then. My job here… is done?"

Morrow glanced at him indifferently.

"Go."

The thrall was of no use anymore. Their escape from the city would be handled by a different sleeper cell. If it was up to her, she would have gotten rid of the man — and his people — to clean up loose ends, but they could become useful in the future.

Even mundanes could do a lot of harm if armed with the right tools. Although Morrow felt it was beneath her to use vulgar weapons of the bygone era, in the grand scheme of things, not even crude instruments like that could be neglected.

Others might not have known, but she understood what was at stake.

The man disappeared, and the entrance to the tunnel was cleared.

…Their exodus from the underground factory was being dragged out, however, because the creature cage was slow to arrive.

Morrow felt irritated.

'What is taking them so long?'

She thought about sending someone else to fetch the guard cohort, then decided against it and took out a special Memory. Although

using it required some essence to be spent, right now, time was more important.

The Memory was called the [Reaching Hand], and consisted of a scattering of finger bones. Each of the four cohorts under Morrow's command was in possession of a phalanx, and she held the fifth one. People who touched the ancient phalanxes could communicate with each other across small distances.

Ironically, the reach of the [Reaching Hand] was not large. However, it possessed the unique quality of being shielded from most divination Abilities, which was very valuable for the sort of mission they were currently on.

Morrow gripped the bone and spoke, mentally connecting to the cohort that guarded the creature cage on another level of the factory:

"Mont. Where are you?"

Soon, the leader of the cohort responded, her voice resonating in the vast production hall:

"Sister Morrow? We are guarding the creature. Has something happened?"

Morrow suddenly felt a bad premonition.

"What do you mean? Have you not received my order?"

Awakened Mont lingered.

"...I am sorry, Sister. What order?"

She gritted her teeth.

"I sent two…"

But then, Morrow grew silent.

The two Awakened she had sent to relay the order… why were they not back yet? She had assumed that they had stayed with Mont to help move the cage, but why would they?

'Not good.'

She hesitated for a split second, then said calmly:

"Get the cage here right now."

What had happened? Had the enemy already discovered their location and silently infiltrated the factory? How could they, without disturbing any of the wards she had placed on all the entrances?.

If the soldiers of Valor were already here…

She glanced at her subordinates and barked:

"Assemble into a battle formation! Prepare for an attack!"

A moment later, Morrow reached through the phalanx to the cohort that had gone forward to scout out the tunnel:

"Rikas, return immediately."

There was a short span of silence, and then she heard the familiar voice of Awakened Rikas:

"Yes, Sister. We are coming."

Concerned, the warriors of Song swiftly assembled into a defensive formation. They stood near the entrance to the tunnel, looking nervously into the darkness of the production hall. The factory was silent.

Soon, the silence was disturbed by a loud noise. With a screeching sound of rusted metal, a cargo elevator arrived. Its doors opened, revealing a massive cage of enchanted alloy. Seven Awakened used all their strength to roll the cage forward.

Morrow secretly let out a relieved sigh.

'...At least the creature is secured.'

Now, they were only missing the two messengers and the cohort that hed entered the tunnel.

"Rikas, how long before you arrive?"

There was a stretch of silence again before he responded:

"Sister… we are coming."

Morrow frowned.

The familiar voice persisted:

"We are… we are…"

Something was very, very wrong with it.

"We are coming…"

The voice… it did not come from the phalanx. Instead, it came directly from the dark entrance of the tunnel.

She looked into the hole, seeing only a boundless expanse of shadows.

Then, something rolled out of the darkness.

…It was the severed head of Awakened Rikas.

Chapter-1145: Slither of Fear

Morrow stared at the severed head for a split moment, feeling cold terror creep into her heart. The clean cut, the hollow emptiness of his dead eyes, the dark entrance into the tunnel behind…

Were… were they all dead? A whole cohort of experienced, battle-hardened Awakened warriors of the great clan Song, wiped out in such a short span of time without making even a single sound?

Had a human done that? No, that was impossible. Only Whispering Blade would have been capable of slaughtering them in such a manner. But then, Madoc would never lower himself to play with his prey…

What kind of abomination was it, then?

How had the dogs of Valor allowed a monster like that to live freely under their city?!

Then, Morrow scowled.

Why was she scared? What was there to be scared of? Neither death nor Nightmare Creatures had ever frightened her before.

Her people seemed to be shaken, too, so unbecoming of the elites of a great clan.

'A mental attack.'

The creature must have been employing some kind of beguilement.

She growled:

"Activate the mental resistance enchantments!"

At the same time, she raised her hand and clicked her fingers,

sending a devastating sonic shockwave into the tunnel. A deafening boom rolled through the production hall, and a fountain of stone dust and debris shot out of the dark entrance.

The Awakened of Song poured essence into the protective charms they carried. Instantly, it was as if they could breathe again… the memory of terror still lingered, though, gnawing at their willpower.

There were twenty of them left, gathered in a circular defensive formation that had no blind zones, with the massive cage placed in the center. Morrow stared in the direction of the tunnel tensely, wondering whether her attack caught the creature or not.

When the echoes of the sonic boom died down and an unnerving silence settled over the production hall, she lingered for a moment, then gave the order to dismiss luminous memories.

Trapped in a circle of light, they were too vulnerable. Instead of relying on natural vision, the messengers of Song sacrificed a bit of essence to activate enchantments that granted them the ability to see in the dark.

Instantly, the whole production hall was unveiled before them. Nothing could escape their gazes…

But the hall was empty. There was nothing within its dark expanse except for old machines and shadows.

Morrow raised her hand, brought her thumb and middle finger together, and then said loudly:

"Show yourself, creature!"

There was a moment of silence.

And then a moment more.

And then, the severed head laying in the dust beside her spoke, its mouth unmoving:

"Creature… creature… creature…"

It spoke in Morrow's own voice.

The Awakened threw unsettled glances at the head of Rikas, which stared back at them with hollow eyes.

'What kind of a trick…'

"Don't pay any attention to it! It's a distraction!"

She snarled, then looked away from the morbid visage of the speaking severed head and concentrated on the production hall, trying to predict where the attack would come from.

The Awakened follow her example, too.

…Except for one.

The man who had been the furthest from the entrance to the tunnel swayed slightly.

Then, his head slid from his shoulders and fell to the floor, rolling through the dust as the body toppled behind it.

In that short instant, when everyone had gotten distracted by the creature mimicking Morrow's voice, another Awakened was mercilessly slain.

And now, there were only nineteen of them.

'Damn it!'

Morrow clapped her hands together, unleashing the full force of her Aspect. A destructive sonic shockwave spread like a ring from the formation of the Awakened, obliterating a large swath of the production hall. The concrete floor cracked, the old machines were torn apart, the still conveyor belts were ripped, and shreds of alloy flew away like jagged bullets.

Nothing within the circle of destruction could have escaped unscathed.

In the silence that followed…

The severed head of Rikas spoke again, unperturbed:

"Pay… pay… pay…"

Ascended Morrow gritted her teeth, calmly analyzing the situation. Where was the enemy? What were its capabilities?

There was something else beneath her calmness, though.

A slither of fear.

This time, one that had nothing to do with an insidious outside influence.

A moment later, two things happened.

First, a loud metallic click came from somewhere within the defensive formation… from the massive cage that contained the enthralled abomination.

Second, a section of the production hall's ceiling suddenly collapsed, and armored figures poured through the breach.

***

A short time earlier, many levels above the production hall of the underground factory, Knight Amiran was standing in the middle of a wide corridor. He was surrounded by Awakened of Valor, who were stealthily moving forward.

A woman in light armor fashioned out of abomination leather was making a report:

"Sir. We have dismantled the outer layers of the detection wards. The enemy should be right below us by now, but… moving further unnoticed will be hard. The elevator shafts are especially problematic."

He looked down, then nodded.

"Try your best."

His subordinate moved to return to her task, but at that moment, the floor trembled slightly.

Amiran frowned.

'What…'

Why would the enemy abandon caution now?

He raised his head to give an order, but at that moment, something flashed in the corner of his eye.

Amiran swiftly turned, noticing the back of a small creature — some sort of a gremlin — scurrying into the darkness.

His face darkened.

"Our presence has been discovered."

There was another tremor, this one much stronger than the first.

The worms had to be trying to collapse the wall of a tunnel in a hurry, hoping to escape. If so, he was going to have to disappoint them.

Amiran had been planning to proceed further down quietly, even if it took more time. But now that such an approach was off the table, there was a need to accelerate things.

There was a sword on his belt, and a war hammer on his back.

Unsheathing the sword and pulling the hammer from its loop, Amiran bellowed:

"Warriors of Valor! With me!"

Then, he called upon his Aspect and slammed the war hammer into the floor.

A wave of crushing force traveled downward, piercing through multiple levels of the underground factory and opening a ravaged path to the main production hall.

Without a moment of hesitation, Knight Amiran grinned and jumped down into the dark breach.

"Death to the enemy! Let no one escape!"

Chapter-1146: Blood Rain

Some of his warriors were going to use flight Memories to follow, others would rappel down. But Amiran himself had no need for these measures — he simply plummeted through the breach, falling into the darkness like a meteor of steel.

Reaching the main production hall, he thrust his sword forward. Invisible force flowed off the blade, forming a brittle field below him — a series of them, actually, each as thin as a sheet of paper.

Breaking through these invisible panes of force allowed Amiran to slow his fall. He landed on the floor in a roll and jumped to his feet a split second later, ready to attack and carve out a path for his men to follow.

If everything went right, the enemy would have been surprised by the collapsing ceiling and the sudden arrival of a Valor Knight. Even if their shock did not last long, a few seconds would be enough…

But he was not given a few seconds. Nothing went right from the start.

As soon as Amiran and the first of his warriors landed, they were greeted by a devastating sonic boom. He felt a powerful shockwave travel through his body, almost strong enough to cause his organs to burst. Luckily, he was resilient enough to withstand it…

The same couldn't be said for the Awakened behind him. With pained screams, they dropped down, blood flowing from every orifice on their bodies.

Dead.

It was as though the enemy had been waiting in a battle formation, ready to defend themselves.

"How dare you!"

As more and more armored Awakened poured through the breach, Amiran roared and dashed forward. There was something strange, though… at the last moment before his lunge, it was as if a drop of blood fell on his helmet from somewhere above. He did not pay it any attention.

In front of him was a loose circle of Awakened protecting something that resembled a large alloy crate. There was some kind of abominable monster inside, no doubt — bringing a Nightmare Creature inside a human city was just what the witch, Beastmaster, would do.

…And allowing the crate to be smuggled into the city despite knowing about its contents was exactly what Valor would do, if it meant leaving the assassins no chance to escape.

Amiran's gaze quickly found the leader of the Song infiltration team — a striking woman whose beauty could neither be hidden by unassuming civilian clothes nor blemished by an ugly scar running across her face.

His eyes narrowed slightly.

'Morrow…'

There were not that many Masters in the world, and even fewer served the great clans directly. Of course, Amiran knew her — the scarred woman was a powerful opponent.

Not as powerful as he was, of course.

Their eyes met, and before she could click her fingers, Amiran struck with both his sword and his hammer, sending two horizontal waves of force flying forward — one cutting, the other crushing.

The waves collided with a sonic shockwave in the middle of the hall, producing a roaring explosion. Bits of concrete shot outward like shrapnel.

It was then that his mind registered a few incongruities in the scene

before him.

First of all, the entrance to the tunnel had already been revealed — however, the enemy did not appear to be in a hurry to enter it, as if wary of the darkness beyond.

Secondly, the main production hall was in a sorry state even before the explosion, seemingly ravaged by Morrow's powers.

There were also too few Awakened in her formation… no more than twenty. Four full cohorts of Song infiltrators had crossed the city gate checkpoint, so what happened to the rest of them?

…And lastly, there was a gruesomely beheaded body on the floor in front of Song's warriors. One of their own.

Just what the hell was going on?

There was something else, too…

For a moment, just before the waves of force collided and a cloud of dust obscured the view, Amiran thought that he had noticed something. A vague silhouette that moved on top of the massive cage, dissolving into darkness.

'An archer?'

Lowering his head to protect the slit of his helmet's visor, he burst through the cloud of dust and raised his sword.

No matter what tricks the enemy had in store, he was going to cut them all down. Especially now that he knew that the numbers were even more on their side than expected, Knight Amiran had no doubt.

'The main priorities are Morrow and the caged creature...'

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Morrow silently cursed.

'So it was Valor all along…'

It seemed that they had walked into a trap. The servants of the King of Swords had turned out to be more cunning than expected.

Someone had been waiting in the tunnel all along, and now, the cavalry had arrived to finish the job.

Who had been compromised? It had to be the thrall responsible for clearing the path to the inner city… ah, but it did not matter now.

The enemy blundered in their attack, maybe because she had decided to accelerate the plan. The invisible assassin had revealed their presence too early, and instead of being surprised by the sudden breach of the production hall, the messengers of Song were ready for it.

Which was why Morrow managed to slay several of Valor Awakened the moment they landed on the floor.

Not their leader, though… a giant of a man wearing heavy armor and wielding both a sword and a war hammer.

Her heart grew slightly cold.

'Knight Amiran…'

Even among the Knights of Valor, this zealot was known for his power and ruthlessness.

He was a bit too straight of a tool, though. A man blessed with incredible strength, but very little imagination.

A vicious smile appeared on Morrow's face.

'I'll have a chance to bring back a fine trophy, then…'

She sent a sonic shockwave to prevent the Knight from decimating the formation of Song's Awakened, then swiftly looked at the breach. Just how many soldiers had Amiran brought to kill them?

…It was strange.

There were not nearly as many as she would have expected. One

cohort, two, three, four… and that was it.

If Valor knew in advance about the infiltration team, why would they only send that many?

And there was something else.

Instead of more cohorts of Awakened… streams of blood flowed from the breach, crimson drops falling like rain. The soldiers of Valor who had already landed seemed shaken because of that.

Morrow hesitated.

'What is the meaning of this?'

Her hesitation only lasted a split second, however.

Then, there was no more time to think.

Chapter-1147: Song of Slaughter

Amiran lunged forward, calling upon his Aspect and bringing down an avalanche of destructive force upon the formation of the Song infiltrators. Two waves of crushing power rolled forward from his weapons… only to shatter against the invisible bulwark of a sonic boom.

The concrete floor was shattered as the whole factory trembled.

A moment later, a swift silhouette shot toward him from the cloud of dust — Morrow, her calm eyes full of cold murderous intent. Her shabby civilian clothes were torn, revealing glimpses of a slender enchanted armor hidden beneath.

In her hand, there was a narrow blade that seemed too fragile to be used in actual combat.

Amiran raised his sword, batting the blade away. At the same time, his hammer flew forward, the spike protruding from its top aimed precisely at the enemy's unprotected throat.

However, as soon as his sword met the steel of Morrow's weapon, there was a melodious ring. That ring suddenly magnified, crashing into him like a stone wall. Grimacing from pain piercing his ears, the Knight of Valor was thrown back.

He rolled over his shoulder, catching a glimpse of his warriors. They were advancing, ready to clash with the Awakened of Clan Song… even though Amiran only saw them for a tiny sliver of a second, he noticed two things.

First, the blood spilling from the breach in the roof of the main production hall. Second, the fact that only four of the six cohorts seemed to have made it down.

Wrath ignited in his heart.

'Treacherous worms…'

One of Morrow's cohorts was missing, and now, two of his own had failed to descend. It was not hard to understand what had most likely happened — the damned witch must have sent some of her people to ambush the warriors of Valor on the upper levels of the factory. To sacrifice their lives so that the rest could escape.

A cunning maneuver… albeit a fruitless one. It was of no use. Even with the missing cohort buying the infiltrators time with their blood, the force of Song was still hopelessly outmatched.

Morrow was desperate. And wouldn't she be?

The executioner she faced was none other than Amiran. The sword of Valor was inescapable.

These thoughts flashed through his mind in an instant. Landing on his feet, Amiran calmly looked up and saw the slender blade falling on his head. His helmet was probably strong enough to withstand the sharp edge, but it was forged out of the best of Valor's steel — should the strike land, there would be a ringing, and that ringing would be turned into another sonic explosion by the enemy.

Instead of the helmet, the blade struck a shield of invisible force that appeared in the air above Amiran. He also wrapped both his weapons with thin layers of force — he was a fast learner, after all. After that first strike, Morrow would find it hard to turn the sound of clashing blades against him.

As the two Masters collided with each other in a lethal battle, so did their soldiers. The Awakened of Valor descended on the formation of the infiltrators like a steel tide, threatening to overwhelm it in an instant.

Unfortunately for them, the Awakened of Song were not so easily overwhelmed.

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'Damn it…'

Morrow saw one of her soldiers fall to the ground in a fountain of blood. His armor was shattered, and the wretched warrior of Valor who had killed him was already moving to attack another.

But then, the servant of the King of Swords fell, too, his back tore open.

She felt wicked joy. It was strange, though… Morrow missed which of her people had avenged their brother. It must have been a ranged attack, since no one was close enough to deliver a melee strike. There, at the edge of the formation, there was only emptiness and darkness.

A good shot, then.

Morrow hummed, and her humming was picked up by the rest of the Song's messengers. Bright smiles bloomed on their faces. The humming was not an expression of some Awakened power or a harbinger of a devastating sonic attack… it was simply their song.

A song of slaughter.

'This brute has a tough shell…'

She was entangled in a fierce fight with Knight Amiran, preventing him from devastating the formation. Of course, the dog was also preventing her from massacring the attacking Awakened… for now.

Amiran was powerful, skilled, and intelligent. But he was also arrogant and rigid. Morrow had already landed half a dozen blows on his armor… the problem was that the armor was too tough. It had to be a Transcendent Memory created by the best forgemasters of Clan Valor, since even her blade — bestowed by the Queen herself — was powerless against its enchanted steel.

Even more frustratingly, the Knight was using his Aspect to wrap himself in a thin layer of protective force, stifling all sounds that could have resulted from their clash.

Still, it was just a matter of time before he made a mistake.

Morrow was confident…

Just a dozen seconds later, however, her confidence waned.

Not because she felt pressured by Amiran — and she did, of course. A Knight of Valor was not an enemy to be taken lightly. No, it was because Morrow was suddenly unsure of how much time she had left.

Because their soldiers were dying too quickly.

All of them were the absolute elites of the Awakened world, so their battle was unsurprisingly intense and bloody. The whole factory was quaking and convulsing from the magnitude of the unleashed violence, as if on the verge of collapsing.

Before it did, they would have to escape to the streets.

And yet… the battle was somehow too bloody, and too lethal. There were too many corpses on the ground already, especially at the edges of the formation, where the fighting was supposed to be less intense.

Morrow remembered that the assassin Amiran had sent ahead of the main force was still here, somewhere, in the production hall — that could have been an explanation, if not for the fact that there were more of Valor warriors dying than that of Song.

Something… something strange was going on.

Morrow deflected a glancing blow from Amiran's sword and evaded the beak of the war hammer, pushing forward to deliver a strike of her own.

'I am missing something. Something... is not right...'

Even though she was suppressing the valiant Knight, and even though her soldiers were seemingly prevailing against the servants of Valor…

A cold, unsettling feeling slowly found its way into Morrow's heart.

Chapter-1148: Unsealed

Knight Amiran was forceful and oppressive, his every move bringing with it a promise of death. And yet, neither his sword nor his hammer could reach her. Not even his insidious Aspect was enough to bring Morrow down.

She had slain Nightmare Creatures more dangerous than this Ascended warrior.

She had slain more dangerous humans, too.

Amiran's warriors were valiant and skilled, each at the very pinnacle of what an Awakened could achieve. Numbers were on their side — and yet, for each messenger of Song that fell, two of Valor's dogs died.

Their trap had turned out to be strangely clumsy and inefficient. By now, Morrow knew that there was a possibility of victory — unless the enemy received reinforcements soon, they would be able to escape.

And carry out the plan.

However…

She was missing something.

Which was why Morrow allowed her attention to wander. Being distracted in a fight against someone like Amiran was tantamount to suicide… but she did so nevertheless.

Her blade failed to reach the Knight's armor again.

Her body received several ghastly wounds because of her inattention.

More and more Awakened died around them.

But Morrow coldly continued to observe.

And then, she saw it — a warrior of Valor, falling down with a pained scream, blood streaming from his torn neck.

Only there had been no one near to tear it.

It was subtle and almost unnoticeable in the havoc of the battle, but she saw it clearly. The nearest of her soldiers was too busy defending against two powerful Awakened. It could not have been a ranged attack, either — the angle was all wrong.

It was as if darkness itself reached forth and sliced the man's throat open with sharp claws.

Morrow's eyes darted to the opposite side of the formation, just in time to see one of Song's Awakened die. His hand suddenly bloomed with blood, and so, the attacking soldier of Valor received a chance to plunge her weapon into the slit of his visor.

The hand of her subordinate had been severed completely — a clean, fierce cut that sliced through armor, flesh, and bone as if not meeting any resistance.

Only… the weapon that had killed her man was a spear. There was no way it could deliver a cut like that.

Morrow suddenly felt cold.

'There is… there is another here.'

There was someone — something — insidious and sinister moving unseen through the darkness, slaughtering the men of both Valor and Song indiscriminately. Silently. Inescapably…

The image of a severed head rolling from the dark entrance of the tunnel suddenly surfaced in her mind.

Morrow's blood turned to ice.

Who was it? What was it?

What… what had they unleashed from that darkness?

Shaking these infantile thoughts, she snarled.

'Does it matter?'

It did not… whatever it was, she would destroy it, just like she was going to destroy these wretched minions of the King of Swords.

Morrow glanced at Amiran, who was continuing to rain devastating blows on her, blind to what was going on.

'Fool.'

No matter the cost… the plan had to be carried out. She had to salvage what little could be salvaged from this unforeseen situation.

Morrow hesitated for a moment, then pretended to be pushed back by one of his strikes and momentarily lose her balance.

Amiran rushed forward like a frenzied dog, intending to capitalize on the opening. His hammer fell down and landed on her shoulder… in a flash of pain, Morrow heard her bones shatter.

But it did not matter, because in that instant, she was practically face-to-face with the hateful brute.

Morrow opened her mouth…

And shrieked.

As her essence burned, a deafening wail shook the underground factory.

***

Clutching his ears — an irrational gesture, considering that they were covered by the steel of his helmet — Amiran fell to the ground and wreathed in pain. His whole world was pain. It was as though a white-hot screwdriver was being driven into his brain, mercilessly destroying every thought.

He felt blood streaming from his ears.

'What… is that woman…'

He knew that Morrow would not let the chance to finish him off go. Shaking off the agony, Amiran gritted his teeth and moved.

A split second later, the tip of a narrow blade was almost at his throat. He raised a hand and grabbed it with an armored gauntlet.

"...Too slow, witch."

He couldn't even hear his own voice through the ringing in his ears.

Amiran had managed to stop the fatal strike from killing him, but the position he was in still promised nothing good. He was kneeling and dazed, while the enemy was free to attack however she wished.

But strangely… Morrow did not attack.

Instead, she let go of her blade and dashed back, toward the formation of her Awakened. There was blood flowing from her mouth.

He looked in that direction.

The diabolical wail Morrow had unleashed devastated the whole production hall. There were slabs of concrete falling from above. What little remained of old machinery had been turned into piles of scrap. The floor had become uneven and full of deep cracks.

The Awakened on both sides fared no better. Many were dead — on both sides. Their mouths were opened in silent screams, their faces turned into gruesome paintings of blood by the power of the wicked attack. Even those who wielded Memories meant to protect against just this kind of threat did not escape unscathed.

'What the hell is she trying to…'

Amiran did not know, but he knew that he had to stop the ruthless witch from accomplishing whatever it was she was planning.

He lunged forward, aiming to catch up to Morrow. Luckily, there was not much distance between them, and the Ascended of Song was severely wounded. That last blow he had delivered made a mess of her right shoulder and clavicle…

It was then that Amiran saw it. In the direction where Morrow was running, behind the decimated line of Song's defensive formation…

A massive alloy container that held an enthralled Nightmare Creature inside.

His pupils narrowed.

'I see…'

Amiran understood what Morrow wanted to achieve. She must have abandoned all hope of delivering the abomination to the inner city and wanted to unleash it right here and now. Sadly for her… he would not give her that chance.

He raised his sword, ready to send a wave of force at the back of the escaping woman. But then, a vague silhouette suddenly lunged at him from the side.

Reacting on instinct, Amiran lashed out with his hammer. The attacker dove beneath it and delivered a strike with a sharp, narrow stiletto.

'Pathetic.'

One of Song's worms must have already recovered enough to attack. The Knight of Valor simply moved his arm, shielding those seams of his armor that protected vital organs. All the attacker could do was drive his stiletto between the rerebrace and the couter, and even then just by a centimeter or two — delivering an insignificant wound to his elbow.

The next moment, Amiran counterattacked, forcing the unclear figure to stagger away. The attacker seemed to dissolve into darkness, as if he… she?... had never existed at all.

"Coward!"

Amiran growled and continued his pursuit. What had that cowardly attack achieved? Nothing. Morrow would still not escape.

He prepared to deliver another strike, but then suddenly swayed.

He felt... weak.

Confused and suddenly unsettled, Amiran glanced at his elbow, where a few drops of blood seeped from beneath the impregnable plates of his armor.

The blood… why did it seem almost black?

The Knight's eyes widened slightly.

'...Poison?'

***

A few moments later, jumping over the corpses of her people, Morrow reached the containment cage. She groaned, spitting out a mouthful of blood, and used the only hand she could move to strike at the seal.

There was no complicated procedure to opening the cage. The key to its magical lock was simple — it was blood. Blood of Song.

Morrow's fist left a bloody imprint on the plate of the seal, and it seemed to ignite, burning away in an instant.

The clasps holding the cage closed fell away, and it burst open.

Inside was a creature so ghastly and revolting that anyone would have been terrified to see it.

But Morrow only smiled. She grinned, revealing bloodied teeth.

"Go! Slaughter everyone who is not Song! To the surface!"

The creature unfolded from within the cage and moved, following her command.

But… what was that?

Why was the abomination bleeding?

There were several thin, shallow cuts on its grey hide, seemingly delivered by a blade so sharp as to be perfect.

And its many eyes, why were they not full of hollow obedience?

Instead, they were brimming with something else…

Madness.

Boundless, murderous madness.

And hunger.

Chapter-1149: Uncaged

The creature escaped its cage.

It was a revolting thing, a towering mass of grey flesh with a hundred nimble limbs and a scattering of huge, eerily human-like eyes. All of them burned with delirious frenzy.

Its enormous body continued to unfold, occupying much more space on the outside of the container than there had been on the inside. Its limbs moved, sharp claws shooting in all directions.

Morrow might have been able to resist the terrifying abomination if she had been prepared. But she wasn't. Her body had been battered and wounded, and her mind was momentarily frozen by the visage of the creature that had somehow escaped its enthrallment.

She was slow to react by only a split second, but that was all it took. Her figure disappeared in a tide of slithering grey limbs, and, just like that…

An Ascended of the great clan Song had been killed.

Amiran watched her die with an incredulous expression.

'Such irony…'

The witch had been slain by her own pet abomination. The death of a powerful enemy should have brought him joy, but he felt a grim sense of dread instead… after all, the creature had to be dealt with.

And Amiran, despite his pride and strength, was not confident in his chances.

He would have been a fool not to recognize the revolting monstrosity for what it was — a Corrupted. And of a high Class, from the looks of

it. A Devil? No, worse than that… a Tyrant.

'These crazy wretches… they smuggled a Corrupted Tyrant into a human city? They were planning to unleash that thing within a siege capital's walls?'

Of course, Amiran himself was among the people who had knowingly allowed the Corrupted Tyrant to be smuggled into a human city, because it suited their goals. The hypocrisy of his contempt did not escape him, but he brushed it off. There was no time to ponder such matters.

Because the Tyrant was starting to move.

There were still a couple dozen Awakened left alive in the ruined production hall, all dazed by Morrow's dreadful wail. Some of them belonged to Clan Valor, and some of them belonged to Clan Song — however, at the moment, their allegiance did not matter. The abomination did not care about whom they served, after all.

Grey limbs shot through the air, grabbing several of the Awakened that were closest to the broken cage. Blood spilled to the ground.

…Amiran was already moving.

"Regroup! Concentrate your attacks on the monster!"

He gritted his teeth, feeling the toxin sap his speed and strength. What kind of treacherous blade had that Awakened assassin used? A Master like Amiran was not easy to poison, and yet, he could feel a sickening weakness spreading through his body.

Fighting through that weakness, he growled and threw his hammer with all the might of an Ascended Knight.

The war hammer spun as it flew toward the Tyrant with the speed of a bullet. And, as if a path had been opened by its passage, a furious torrent of invisible force followed.

The hammer and the torrent of force struck the massive body of the shambling horror with such fury that a sudden explosion rang out. A full-power strike from Amiran was destructive enough to shatter the

gates of a Citadel… the Tyrant, however, was simply thrown back.

The bodies of the Awakened it had grabbed fell to the ground.

But then...

They slowly stood up.

Only they did not look like humans anymore.

There was a wicked, alien coldness hiding in their eyes, and ghostly black strings extending from their backs toward the limbs of the grey abomination.

The faces of the risen corpses twisted, and they awkwardly lunged toward the nearest Awakened. More blood spilled.

Amiran cursed.

'A puppeteer…'

Before, he had not been too worried about the creature escaping from the factory and reaching the industrial zone above — that was within the parameters of the mission. Now, however… allowing the Tyrant access to crowds of refugees was the same as gifting it an army. That, he could not allow.

The creature had to be destroyed now, before it received an opportunity to create a legion of flesh puppets.

In fact, the Tyrant had to know that there were millions of souls to be reaped right above. Intelligent as these creatures were, it should have been trying to escape a dangerous enemy like Amiran and reach the surface, where there was an unlimited supply of bodies for it to turn.

But, for some reason, the appalling abomination seemed hellbent on slaying every human in the main production hall of the underground factory first.

Amiran was not going to complain.

"Attack, you wretches!"

His bellow rolled through the hall, pushing the Awakened into action. The warriors of Valor followed the order without hesitation, while the surviving worms of Song seemed confused about what to do.

Some hesitantly joined the attack on the Tyrant. Some tried to attack fellow humans despite the situation — those were cut down first. Some even tried to escape.

The cowards did not make it far. Amiran was too busy to notice who had killed them, but none managed to disappear into the dark mouth of the tunnel.

The wall of grey flesh and countless limbs surged at the rest of them.

'I have to destroy it… I have to… I have…'

In his heart, Amiran knew that a Corrupted Tyrant was not an enemy he could hope to slay alone. Especially not poisoned and drained by his fight against the cursed witch, Morrow… but this one was strangely weak. Maybe it was weakened by being locked in the enchanted cage for so long, or maybe it was simply the type of Tyrant whose power lay in a legion of minions.

It was also rabid and crazed, almost… unintelligent. Fighting the creature was no different from fighting a powerful Monster, if not for the puppets it could create.

So, there was a chance, no matter how small.

The Awakened died, only to be turned into puppets. The puppets were destroyed in turn. The shambling horror of grey flesh received numerous wounds, many of its long limbs were crushed or severed. The factory seemed to be coming undone.

'I WILL destroy it!'

Even when the last of the Awakened under his command died, Amiran persisted. His sword flashed over and over again, and waves of invisible force crashed into the massive body of the creature in a constant stream. His lungs were burning, and his veins were full of poison. His essence was running dry. But he refused to fail the

mission… he had to prevail.

And then, miraculously…

Amiran did.

The puppets that were reaching out to grab him suddenly swayed, and then fell down. The towering, desiccated mass of grey flesh convulsed, and lifelessly sprawled on the cracked floor.

The Spell spoke into his ears.

He swayed, struggling to believe in what he saw, and fell to one knee. He was utterly spent and barely able to move.

And yet, he had won.

Knight Amiran drew in a hoarse breath.

"I... I won!"

In the silence that followed, a cold voice suddenly resounded from behind him:

"Did you?"

He flinched and turned around, glancing up.

Above him stood a dark apparition. A fiend in fearsome black armor, wearing a demonic mask that was crowned by three twisting horns.

In the mask's eyes, there was nothing but darkness.

'What? Who… who is…'

The mask moved slightly, and the two pools of darkness stared directly into Amiran's soul, making him shudder. The apparition spoke:

"I guess you did."

A moment later, a cold blade slid silently into the slit of Amiran's visor, ending his life.

Chapter-1150: Unseen

[You have slain an Ascended human, Amiran.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny stood for a moment above the Knight's corpse, waiting for the enchanted armor to dissipate into a whirlwind of crimson sparks. Then, he used shadows to turn his gauntlet into a fearsome claw and struck down a few times.

It was not in his habit to mutilate the bodies of his enemies… but he had to mask the initial blade wound that had killed the fearsome Master.

With that, his task here was finished. Sunny tilted his head and thought with a bit of detachment:

'That went more smoothly than I had expected.'

Wiping out ten cohorts of elite Awakened and two Legacy Masters had turned out to be easier than he would have thought.

A force like that… if Sunny had not intervened, their battle would inevitably spill out into the streets above. No matter how sudden Valor's ambush was, the assassins of Song were not pushovers — especially their leader. They would have retreated and eventually made their way to the surface.

But he had prevented that.

Sunny became aware of the infiltration team's location thanks to the gloomy shadow, which had followed them all the way back to this siege capital from Clan Song's territory. After locating the assassins, finding the soldiers of Valor was not hard — he just had to send his other shadows to scour the surrounding area.

Then, what he needed to do was make sure that the two forces annihilated each other completely and with no collateral damage.

Sadly, the infiltrators moved earlier than expected, almost giving Knight Amiran and his soldiers a slip. Sunny had to stall them a little, so he silently killed the two messengers the Ascended of Song — he thought her name was Morrow — sent to retrieve the cohort guarding the cage.

Then, using Shadow Step to move unseen, he entered the tunnel and waited there until the scouts arrived. That was probably the hardest part of the entire mission — killing seven powerful Awakened before they could make a sound was not easy, even for him.

He would have summoned Saint, but she could not share the benefits of wearing Weaver's Mask. So Sunny ended up using Shadow Manifestation to strike simultaneously at all seven. He then pushed the Extraordinary Rock into the mouth of the leader of the cohort and threw the severed head back into the production hall to create a distraction.

A shaken enemy was easier to deal with, so Sunny was not above using a bit of theatrics.

While everybody was staring at the talking head, Sunny killed one more assassin and swiftly dissolved into the shadows. By then, the force of Valor was drawing closer… they were still not fast enough for his taste, though, so he used Imp to hurry the bastards along.

It was then that Morrow decided to blast half of the production hall with a radial sonic attack. Luckily, Sunny was already somewhere where the shockwave could not reach.

When Knight Amiran broke through the roof and launched an assault on the immobilized infiltrators, Sunny was actually inside the cage containing a damn Corrupted Tyrant, slashing the creature with the Sin of Solace to drive it insane. That was another experience he would prefer to never relive.

From the cage, he stepped through the shadow to appear in the corridors above. The force sent by Valor was a bit too strong,

especially now that he had dispatched some of the Song's assassins — he had to equalize the odds a little to make it easier to kill them all.

Sunny waited until most of Amiran's Awakened jumped into the hole in the floor, and then attacked the last dozen or so that remained in the corridor. With the element of surprise on his side and no more need to remain absolutely quiet, dispatching them was not too hard.

By the time he was finished with the bloody task, the battle between Valor and Song was in full swing. However, they were not killing each other well enough — Morrow could still push the attackers back and pull out her forces. So, Sunny moved stealthily around the battlefield, remaining in the form of an incorporeal shadow and using Shadow Manifestation to pick off Awakened from both sides.

He made sure to obfuscate his interference as much as possible, of course. And, just like he had been doing from the very start, he killed the Awakened of Song with blades, and the Awakened of Valor with claws.

Everything went more or less exactly as planned. Sunny only had to expose himself once, to slow down Amiran and let Morrow open the cage — he used the Bitter Cusp to smear black venom on the blade of the Moonlight Shard, since dealing with the heavily armored Knight was not easy.

He also wanted to give the Tyrant more of a shot. The creature was strong, but without any minions and with its mind shattered by the Sin of Solace, there was a chance that it would not be able to give the kind of fight Sunny needed it to give, in order to make all the corpses with claw marks on their bodies look believable.

The Tyrant escaped and slaughtered those Awakened that remained alive. Sunny cut down those who tried to escape and secretly delivered the abomination a few severe wounds, making sure to give Amiran enough time to ravage the body of the Tyrant with his Aspect.

And when all was said and done, he finished off the mighty Knight with his own hand.

The despicable zealot actually thought that he had won, while in reality, his defeat was meticulously orchestrated from the very start.

…Now, silence settled over the ruined production hall.

Ten cohorts of Awakened… humans… were dead. None managed to escape into the streets of the city. No refugee was swallowed by their empty feud.

The warriors of Song had sword wounds on their bodies, while the warriors of Valor were seemingly killed by sharp claws. The massive abomination was turned to paste by Amiran's Aspect.

The picture of what had happened here was clear. The two forces obliterated each other, with the Tyrant succumbing to the wounds delivered by the valiant Knight.

Did Sunny feel guilty about bringing these Awakened to their deaths? He had just murdered seventy people, after all. Much more than he had in his entire life, not counting those from the Nightmares.

Did it matter that the seventy people he murdered were themselves murderers?

Not really.

And he did not really care, either.

Unlike the millions of people who had perished in Falcon Scott, they got what they deserved.

If there was one thing Sunny regretted, it was that Amiran actually managed to land the last strike on the Tyrant, somehow. That was a frustrating loss.

Throwing one last glance at the scene of carnage, Sunny shook his head in dejection.

And disappeared into the shadows, as if he had never been here at all.

Chapter-1151: See no Evil

A ravaged underground hall. Split concrete, old machines turned into piles of scrap, broken walls. Deep darkness chased away by the bright light of electric floodlights.

The stench of blood permeating the air.

And bodies, of course, scattered on the cracked floor. Dozens of them, all bearing terrible wounds. Bodies of the Awakened of Valor, the Awakened of Song… and one more, a ghastly hill of grey flesh that had been a Nightmare Creature before.

Morgan studied the scene of slaughter with a neutral expression as she walked among the corpses. She would linger for a few moments near one of the corpses, then indifferently move on to the next. Her vermilion eyes were cold.

Saint Gilead, the Summer Knight, was more expressive. He was kneeling in front of one of the bodies with a mournful expression on his gallant, handsome face. A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

"Amiran…"

Morgan turned around and looked at the Transcendent.

"Oh. I am sorry, Sir Gilead. I have forgotten that the two of you were once members of the same cohort. Please accept my condolences."

Her voice did not seem too regretful, though.

Summer Knight looked down.

"Sometimes, I forget…"

She raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

The Saint lingered for a few moments, then offered her a calm gaze.

"How much I loathe you and your family."

Morgan smiled slightly and looked away.

"Well. What can I say? We are a loathsome bunch."

With that, she used her armored boot to turn one of the bodies over and asked:

"Does this make sense to you?"

Summer Knight stood up with a sigh and walked over.

"The result is outside expectations, but the sequence of events seems clear. We severely underestimated the opposition. By all accounts, Amiran should have been able to achieve a clean victory… but the presence of a Corrupted Tyrant changed things. Our estimation of Beastmaster's power needs to be adjusted. Still… he slayed the beast, even if the price was his life."

Morgan shook her head.

"Seems clear, huh?"

Her gaze was locked on the fatal sword wound that had killed the Awakened in front of her.

Morgan remained motionless for a few moments.

"...What a beautiful cut."

Seemingly losing interest in the corpse, she turned away and called out to one of the specialists that had been casing the scene. The man walked over and bowed, then delivered a preliminary report. His conclusions were in line with what Saint Gilead had said.

Morgan stared at him bleakly.

"Have the diviners discovered anything?"

The investigator looked away in embarrassment.

"...Nothing, my lady."

A slight frown appeared on her face.

"So you're telling me that six cohorts of Valor's best, armed and armored with forged Memories, lost to four cohorts of Song infiltrators? And that Knight Amiran slayed a Corrupted Tyrant alone?"

The man lowered his head.

"That is what the evidence tells, my lady."

Morgan scoffed.

She remained silent for a while, then turned and addressed a delicate young woman who was standing silently above a severed head:

"What about you, Cassia? Do you see something?"

The young woman shifted slightly and answered in a calm tone:

"...I see nothing."

Morgan tilted her head.

"Are you telling me that you don't see anything, or that you see nothing?"

Summer Knight frowned, thinking that the princess was mocking the blind girl. The young woman, meanwhile, simply nodded.

Morgan grinned.

"Ha!"

She turned to the Saint and pierced him with an amused look.

"See, Sir Gilead. At least someone is not useless here."

Then, her expression darkened.

Morgan looked at the corpse laying at her feet once again and frowned.

After a few moments of silence, she mumbled:

"Was it the House of Night? No, unlikely. That cut… just who could have…"

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Sunny took a step back and bent over, breathing heavily. By his side, Cassie swayed, struggling to catch her balance after her rapier was shattered by Morgan's attack.

...Today, the princess had decided to face the two of them at the same time.

The spar was an especially grueling one. They gave a good fight, cooperating with each other so flawlessly that it almost seemed as if they shared one mind. But, in the end, the princess mercilessly drove them both back. She seemed possessed, attacking with such power and ferocity that Sunny found it almost unnecessary to downplay his abilities.

He pretended to be utterly exhausted — there was little need to pretend, really — and lowered his sword.

"That… that was a good fight, Lady Morgan."

She glanced at her own blade, which was nicked all over and utterly ruined, then threw it aside with frustration.

"Yes. You did well, too."

After catching his breath for a couple of seconds, he slowly straightened and glanced at her with a complicated expression.

"But… are you troubled by something? Your technique seemed a bit distracted today."

Morgan stared at him for a few moments, her face turning cold. Eventually, she said with a hint of discontent in her voice:

"That is not something for a person like you to concern yourself with. Come to think of it… I won't need your services in the next few days, Master Sunless. So make yourself scarce."

Just what he wanted. Sunny put on a suitably alarmed expression and lowered his gaze.

"Ah… as you wish, my lady."

She lingered for a few moments, then scoffed and left.

Sunny and Cassie were left alone in the training room.

It had been two days since the slaughter in the abandoned factory. Morgan seemed to be suspicious that something irregular had taken place in the underground production hall, but not a drop of that suspicion was directed at Sunny.

He had hidden his traces well, and no one within Valor could ever imagine that someone like him was capable of wiping out ten cohorts of Awakened from the great clans, let alone doing it with such insidious and flawless, almost diabolical precision.

As for Sunny, he was effortlessly playing the role of someone who had no clue about what had happened.

Glancing at Cassie, he shrugged.

"What's up with her?"

The blind girl turned her head to face him, then remained silent for a while. Eventually, she said:

"You don't have to worry."

Sunny frowned.

'What was that supposed to mean?'

Did Cassie know something? If anyone would, it was her.

He shook his head, then dragged his tired body across the room to

place the training sword back into its stand.

If Cassie knew, she would keep silent.

But, in any case, Morgan's polite suggestion to disappear for a few days was very timely. No matter how confident he was that he had avoided all suspicion, it was best not to parade in front of emissaries of Valor for a while.

And, to be honest, Sunny was long overdue for a little vacation.

Placing the sword down, he looked at Cassie and asked:

"Hey, about that favor I asked? How about we go to the Dream Realm for a little while? I seem to be free all of a sudden."

The blind girl smiled slightly.

"Sure, no problem."

She carefully placed her broken rapier on the floor and added:

"I already told Nephis. She's free, too."

Sunny froze for a moment, then made a face.

'Damn oracles…'

Chapter-1152: Field Trip

The Ivory Island was as peaceful and idyllic as ever. Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, enjoying the cool breeze and the view of the boundless expanse of the blue sky.

Come to think of it, it was rare to find such a tranquil haven in the Dream Realm. Even the Sanctuary, which was beautiful and serene in its own way, never felt safe — there was always the possibility of an attack, after all. What protected the Sanctuary was people, and people were not omnipotent.

The Crushing was a much more reliable guardian.

The three of them — Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie — had just arrived from the waking world. Sunny was wearing the Shroud of Dusk, since that was his best armor Memory. The other two, however, had slighted their combat armor in favor of lighter garments.

Cassie was wearing the familiar tunic and sea wave cloak, while Nephis was in something that he recognized as the black underlayer of the Starlight Legion Armor.

Sunny still couldn't believe that a mere Awakened Memory of the Second Tier had survived years of wandering through the Dream Realm and the Second Nightmare.

…But, in any way, the three of them looked like people ready for a vacation.

They weren't the only ones, either.

'What is this…'

Sunny glanced toward the entrance to the Tower, where two figures were waiting for them.

Effie was sitting on the ground, enjoying a veritable mountain of snacks. Her Transcendent armor was nowhere to be seen, leaving a lot of olive skin exposed to the sun and the wind. There was a relaxed, extremely pleased expression on her face.

Kai was standing nearby, wearing his military uniform. He was looking at the dragon bones that surrounded the Ivory Tower with a neutral expression on his handsome, slightly melancholic face.

Noticing the new arrivals, Effie happily waved a hand.

"Hey! We're here!"

Sunny walked over, both pleased and confused to see the two of them.

"I see that you're here… but why are you here?"

Kai turned around and smiled slightly.

"Hey. Our companies have spent a lot of time on the city walls recently, so we were rotated out of active duty for a couple of weeks. We're on leave."

Effie nodded.

"Yeah. So when Cassie offered to go on a field trip, we had nothing better to do. Plus, we're curious to revisit a few places, too."

Sunny gave the blind girl a suspicious look. He was sure that he only decided to spend some time on the Chained Island this morning… when the hell had she found time to invite Effie and Kai?

Noticing his gaze, Cassie simply shrugged.

'Well, whatever.'

He was glad to see them, anyway.

"I see. Good, then. But, uh… I wouldn't call it a field trip. I expect to fight at least one creepy abomination this week, so don't get too relaxed."

Effie dismissively waved a greasy hand in the air.

"Yeah, yeah. That abomination, though... is it edible?"

He stared at her bleakly.

"...I'm not sure."

She grinned.

"No problem! We'll just have to find out, then."

Shaking his head, Sunny turned away and glanced at the graceful silhouette of the flying ship that rested on the water not too far away. Since Cassie was the one who knew how to control it, he addressed the next question to her:

"Let's not waste any time. Where to first, captain?"

He had already shared the places he wanted to visit with the blind girl, so she was in charge of plotting the course.

Cassie smiled.

"The first stop is right beneath us, actually. It was not on your list, but I wanted to study the runes there. Just a few hours."

Sunny shrugged.

He had nothing against others adding more locations to the list — they were going to be helping him out with his goals, so it was only fair.

"Let's go, then."

Together, the five of them headed toward the lake and boarded the ship. Cassie entered the runic circle at the stern, saturating it with her soul essence as she gently took the steering oars. The leaves of the sacred tree growing around the mast of the flying vessel rustled gently as it lifted off the lake's surface and soared into the sky.

There were no Sailor Dolls on the deck, and no Fire Keepers to

replace them. The sails were lowered, so their speed was not what it could have been. Still, for a simple descent, that was enough.

The ancient ship moved past the edge of the Ivory Island and tilted down, diving into the sea of clouds. Surrounded by white mist, Sunny suddenly thought about something and turned to Cassie.

"...Have you named it? The ship?"

She lingered for a few moments.

"No. I wasn't sure if I had the right. It had to have had a name before, after all. What did Noctis call it? Do you know?"

Sunny frowned.

"Actually, I never heard him call it anything except for "this beauty"... come to think of it, knowing Noctis, that could have actually been the name. This Beauty."

Nephis listened to them with a hint of interest, while Cassie chuckled.

"...Sounds like something he would do, indeed. In that case, we should give it a good name. Let's come up with one before this journey is over."

They plummeted through the clouds, and as they did, Sunny could feel the ferocious pressure of the Crushing assault the flying vessel. At that height, it should have been obliterating… but, to his surprise, he didn't feel too uncomfortable. Lines of ethereal light ignited along the hull of the ship, as if a powerful enchantment had been activated, and the invisible weight grew weak.

Soon, the clouds receded, and the patchwork landscape of the Chained Isles was revealed far below. Islands shone on the velvet backdrop of the dark abyss like precious gems, connected to each other by the thin threads of the heavenly chains.

And there, right beneath the descending vessel, was an island that Sunny knew all too well. His face darkened a little.

'...This place, huh? I never thought I would return here one day."

Below them were the ruins of the Red Colosseum.

Chapter-1153: Memory Lane

The Red Colosseum was in ruins. Its ancient walls had collapsed, and were now overgrown with verdant vines. The people who had once crowded the tribunes were all long dead. And yet… even the passage of countless years failed to wash away the stain of blood from the surface of the stone that had once been pristine white.

Sunny knew from Cassie that the Colosseum was in a sorry state. He also knew that the island had been infested by all kinds of Nightmare Creatures — probably the remains of Solvane's menagerie of monsters — before the Fire Keepers wiped them out.

The Fire Keepers had also cleared the floor of the arena in order to reveal the buried runes, and now, Cassie was slowly walking along the grooves, tracing their shapes with her steps.

Sunny himself was in a bleak mood. He studied the ruins, remembering the countless bloody battles that had been fought here. This was where he had killed the stone gargoyles… this was where he had killed the emerald skeleton… and this was where he had almost lost his life to the blade of one of the red zealots.

It had been thousands of years since his escape from the Colosseum… no, not quite. In truth, he had never been here at all. The bloody arena he knew was just a mirage conjured up by the Spell, while this… this was the real thing.

It didn't change its vile nature, though.

"Glory…"

Nephis turned at the sound of his whisper. Her striking grey eyes were somber.

"Is this the arena where you were imprisoned?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes… the cage they kept me in was right there, below that pile of rubble. Back then, I barely knew how to move the body that the Spell had given me. My, oh my. Coming to my senses inside that thing was quite a shock."

He looked at her, wondering what body Neph had received in her own Nightmare. She must have been startled to find herself thrust into a non-human vessel, too. After all, there had been no Divine Aspect users before them.

And Divine Aspects, for all their benefits, did not come with an instruction manual.

Changing Star nodded slowly.

"I can imagine."

She didn't say anything else, still keeping the details of her Nightmare to herself.

Sunny sighed.

"Well, anyway. The first few days were rough… and every day that followed was rough, too. I had to fight my way to the center of the arena and face the zealots of the Red Sect there each time. And all the while, crowds of people were cheering me on from the stands… creepy bastards. They were equally happy to see us slaves kill, or see us die. All for the glory of War God."

Kai, who was nearby, nodded.

"I faced those zealots too, on the battlefield. Everyone in the Kingdom of Hope was mad, by that point, but the Warmongers were especially wicked. And they were indeed just as Sunny described them, equally happy to kill as they were to die. Their faith had been perverted beyond belief."

He glanced at the blood-stained stones and added after a short pause:

"Now that I think about it… maybe it is not a coincidence that the

followers of War God were that way. War God is also the deity of humanity, after all."

Sunny chuckled.

"Yeah… well, anyway. I got better as time went on, enough to survive until the moment I could escape. And I did."

Nephis looked around silently.

"It must have been hard. To survive alone."

He shrugged.

"It would have been. But I wasn't alone. There was this guy with me, a local Awakened. A healer. Without him, I would not have lasted nearly as long as I did."

He studied the ruins for a few moments, then gestured in a certain direction.

"That was where Solvane killed him, in the end. At the edge of the island. The fool decided to find courage in the worst moment possible."

Sunny remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"Still… I guess it's better to die with courage than to die without it. Not that I would know."

He looked at Nephis and smiled.

"I must have slaughtered a thousand enemies in this arena, both abominations and humans. But, knowing you, I bet even more died by your sword in the Nightmare."

She glanced north, in the direction of the Hollow Mountains, and shook her head.

"No… actually, I did not kill that many."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Wait… what, really? With your personality?"

Nephis smiled.

"I was only Dormant, in my Nightmare. I was the weakest creature there, by far. Solving problems with a sword is… is a privilege for the strong."

He looked at her with a strange expression.

"Well. You must have learned a lot, then. Weakness is a great teacher."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Sunny regretted saying them. Nephis had always been a symbol of strength, in his mind. A domineering presence that swept away all obstacles to achieve her goals… but in truth, she had spent most of her life as prey being pursued by terrifying predators.

Sunny still remembered the dream he had visited, a fragment of a memory she had about one of the attempts on her life.

She knew about weakness just as much as he did.

Neph's smile slowly faded away.

She remained silent for a while, and then nodded.

"Yes. I did learn a lot."

'Great. Maybe think twice before opening your mouth the next time, fool.'

Sunny hesitated, thinking what to say.

The solemn atmosphere was destroyed a moment later, though, by a loud crinkling noise. Sunny, Nephis, and Kai turned around and looked at Effie, who was completely focused on opening a packet of chips.

The bright colors of the modern packaging looked extremely out of place in the ancient ruin.

Feeling their attention, the huntress looked up, lowered her sunglasses to the tip of her nose, and raised her eyebrows.

"...What?"

Then, she sent a mouthful of synth chips into her mouth and looked around, chewing. After a while, she said:

"I must admit, though. I'm a little upset. That wench Solvane was from the same sect as me, right? How come the temple I ended up in was not nearly as grand and majestic? I mean… do you know how small and damp my room was?"

She shook her head with a sour face.

"What's even the point of being in a sect of war zealots if you don't have an awesome arena like this?"

Chapter-1154: Former Glory

Nothing much happened on the island that had once been the heart of Solvane's lands. The Fire Keepers, it seemed, had been very thorough in exterminating every abomination here — even after several hours, no one had bothered the five Masters.

Not that many things could.

While Cassie was exploring the runes, Sunny simply wandered around the ruins, remembering his days of fighting in the Colosseum. The others had nothing much to do, so they followed him, sometimes starting a conversation, sometimes remaining silent.

Eventually, Effie sighed.

"This sucks. What kind of vacation is that? The mood is so dismal."

Sunny looked at her humorlessly.

"What were you expecting? I did not exactly have a great time in this damned place. Should I be jumping around in joy?"

She blinked a couple of times.

"I mean… yeah? Why not? Think about it. This coliseum is in ruins, but you're still standing. What's not to celebrate?"

Sunny tilted his head a little, then looked at the overgrown remains of the Red Colosseum once more. The place was desolate and forgotten, with nothing remaining of its former glory.

Glory… the bastards who had lusted for it, who had turned Hope's theater into a temple of murder, never found any such thing.

Sunny, however, had survived. Not only that, but he was also a decorated officer now, complete with the highest military awards one

could receive — earned in a war much more meaningful than the senseless one the Warmongers had waged.

He had never put much meaning into his medals, but now that they turned into something to spite Solvane and her zealots with…

'Huh. Damn. It almost feels better than killing her twice?'

A crooked smile appeared on his face.

"Well, if you put it like that… I guess you are right, Effie. I am much more impressive than these fools ever were, aren't I? Hell, they're making a movie about me in NQSC, even."

She glanced at him with an amused expression.

"Uh… let's not get a big head, doofus. And what do you mean, a movie? Another one?!"

Noticing her petrified expression, he grinned.

"Ah, don't worry. It's about Mongrel, technically."

While Effie let out a relieved sigh, Nephis suddenly nodded.

"Oh, yes. I've seen the trailer."

Kai and Sunny looked at her with surprise, while Effie made a strange face and walked away.

"Gods… I think I'm going to be sick…"

She really looked ill. Sunny laughed as he watched her go.

"Hey, where are you going? The mood isn't so dismal anymore, is it?!"

The huntress just waved her hand and disappeared behind a pile of rubble.

He chuckled, but his smile disappeared when Kai asked with a thoughtful expression:

"If the trailer came out this quick, they must be putting a lot of resources into filming. I do wonder, though… are they going to cast an actor to play Mongrel? Or an actress?"

Sunny eyes widened slightly.

"What the hell do you mean, an actress? Why would they cast an actress?! Take that back!"

...While they were bickering, Cassie finished exploring the runes carved in the blood-stained stone. Soon, the flying ship left the ruins of the Red Colosseum behind and cut through the sky.

The night had descended upon the Chained Isles, erasing the border between the Sky Above and the Sky Below. Cold stars shone upon the remains of the shattered kingdom, reflected by the distant flames that burned in the dark abyss.

The flying vessel was moving southeast.

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There were not that many places that Sunny wanted to visit on the Chained Isles. His main goal was the Shipwreck Island, where the corpse of the Sun Prince swung above the Sky Below, tangled in heavenly chains… but he was also interested in one other.

The Southern Island, where the ruined castle of the Shadow Lord stood, and where he had fought Nightmare.

The black steed had become his Shadow, but that was just the phantom of the Spell. Sunny couldn't help but feel curious about what had happened to the real Nightmare… was he perhaps still here, somewhere, in this region of the Dream Realm?

The dark courser was not on the Southern Island anymore, that was sure. After all, Sunny had visited the ruined fortress in the waking world before even knowing what it was — that was where he had welcomed Effie and Kai to the Chained Isles — and had not met Nightmare there.

Still, maybe there were some clues.

Countless years had passed since the time when the shadow creature remained in the castle, stubbornly guarding the citadel of a dead master. Was the real Nightmare still alive? Had he grown stronger? Had he succumbed to the Corruption that seemed to have devoured everything and everyone else in the Dream Realm?

Sunny wanted to know, but most of all, he was interested in finding a shadow creature. It could lead to a lot of fragments at worst, and a new Shadow at best.

Apart from the Southern Island, though… Nephis obviously did not have any places in mind. Effie wished to visit the Temple of the Chalice.

Kai would have wanted to return to the Ivory City, perhaps, to reminisce on the past… but that city was no more. It had fallen into the Sky Below, replaced by the ever-growing Tear that would one day swallow all the Chained Isles.

Strangely, the place where Cassie would have wanted to visit was gone, too. The Night Temple — where she had spent several months caring for her mentor, the One in the North — was destroyed as a result of the battle between Sky Tide and Saint Cormac.

…The blind girl did add one location to the list, though. And a very strange one, at that — the island where an eerie creature of the lake had once bestowed them with the Ruby Knife. Sunny did not know what she wanted to find there, but had no objections to her request.

They were going to the Southern Island first, however, so that creepy place was still far away.

Enjoying the view of the starlit sky, Sunny breathed in the cool night air and smiled as he listened to his friends chatting.

There would be dangers and dire threats once he returned to Antarctica, but for the next few days, life promised to be tranquil and uncomplicated. There would be a bit of exploration, a bit of treasure hunting, and a bit of fighting, as well — but not the dreadful kind. It was truly like a vacation.

His smile grew a little wistful.

'...Damnation. Just when did the Dream Realm become nicer than the waking world?'

Chapter-1155: What the Future Holds

The flying vessel continued moving southeast. The members of the cohort remained at the stern, keeping Cassie company. They spent some time idly talking about this and that, then silently enjoyed the beautiful sight of the night sky.

Safely hidden within the Crushing, they were temporarily safe from all threats. That feeling was strange… the only thing stranger was the fact that Effie seemed to have lost her appetite, somehow. Now that was an anomaly unlike anything Sunny had witnessed before. He wanted to tease the huntress, but changed his mind at the last moment.

The quiet night put him in a contemplative mood. The thing Sunny thought about was… how hard it had become to keep a conversation going in the company of his friends, these days. Or anyone else, really.

He had never been a great conversationalist — in fact, growing up, Sunny had always found it torturously hard to fit in with people. But after becoming an Awakened, somewhere along the way, he seemed to have developed that ability. Now, however, it was getting harder once again.

Sunny had thought that such problems would miraculously disappear after he chose to trust the people he cared about. But he had been proven wrong.

'It's strange…'

But then, was it really? In truth, it was not his ability to hold a conversation that was the problem, but his whole life instead.

Most of the things he thought and did were too sensitive to discuss, not because he did not trust his friends, but because he didn't want to involve them in his mess.

More than that, Sunny had only done two things after coming to Antarctica — fight the Nightmare Creatures and try to fulfill his duty as a member of the Evacuation Army. He did not really have any hobbies or exciting things to share…

His friends were more or less the same.

'Is it all there is to life?'

Bloodshed and war?

As he studied the night sky with a wistful expression, Kai looked at him and said:

"Penny for your thoughts?"

A pale smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"Oh… it's nothing. I, uh... I was just thinking about how messed up our lives have become. These days, it seems that there's nothing to talk about except for what we killed, how we killed it, and how to kill it better. So I'm wondering, is that what adulthood is? Work, work, and then more work.

I thought that becoming a Master would be freeing, but honestly, I was having so much more fun as an Awakened."

Kai sighed.

"It does seem like that, doesn't it?"

Effie, who was hugging the wooden railing of the flying ship as if battling motion sickness, looked at them with a miserable face.

"...I don't know what you are talking about. I'm having tons of fun every day!"

Sunny gave her a dubious look.

"Yeah… maybe check the expiration date the next time you smuggle a bunch of snacks into the Dream Realm. Those synthetic chips must have been left over from the Dark Times, considering your current state."

She gritted her teeth, then made a rude gesture in his direction. Sunny grinned.

At that moment, Cassie suddenly spoke:

"I get what Sunny is saying. But… is there something wrong with being focused on "work"? I am usually very busy, too, and there's little time for anything else except for my duties. However, it's not bad. I find it very rewarding, actually."

Sunny scoffed.

"I guess there's nothing wrong, as long as you've chosen the right profession. But being an abomination exterminator does not really suit my taste… and I did not even choose it, really. It just happened that way."

Nephis gave him a long look, then turned away and said evenly:

"It is true that none of us chose to become infected by the Spell. But we are Awakened now, so… exterminating abominations comes with the territory. We receive plenty of privileges in exchange. There's no point in thinking about the past with regret."

Sunny glanced at her with a bleak expression. Well, it was not like she was wrong… no matter how dejected he felt about the current situation, it was infinitely better than his mundane life in the outskirts.

What would have awaited Sunny if he had never become infected by Spell? A bitter life and an early grave, most likely.

…No, actually, a grave would have been an impossible luxury.

Kai lingered for a few moments before saying quietly:

"It's not the past that worries me. It's the future."

Effie remained silent, but her face turned somber. Sunny looked at his friend with curiosity.

"What do you mean?"

Kai shrugged.

"The Antarctica Campaign seems like a world of its own, but it will be over in a handful of months. What happens next? The influx of refugees and the loss of the Southern Quadrant will make living conditions across the waking world worse for everyone. There'll be an unprecedented influx of Awakened, as well, which is bound to change the situation in the Dream Realm.

The Great Clans seem to be in turmoil, and on top of that… there's no guarantee that something like the Chain of Nightmares won't happen again. I am not talking about the future of the human race, though… I am talking about our personal future. What will be our roles in that world?"

Sunny lingered for a while.

"I have no idea."

Kai sighed, then glanced at Nephis.

"Lady Nephis and Cassie will most likely become Saints with the backing of Clan Valor. But that path is closed for the rest of us… unless we swear allegiance to a Legacy clan. Alternatively, we can remain with the government. But if Antarctica has proven one thing, it is that the government is not strong enough to protect the waking world with only its own strength. So what is the point…"

Sunny studied his face for a few moments.

Kai, it seemed, was struggling with his naively sincere sense of duty.

He asked:

"So, what? Are you thinking about becoming a Legacy?"

The handsome archer looked at him with a heavy expression.

"Aren't you?"

Sunny smiled with a corner of his mouth, then turned away.

"...No. I'd rather die, to be honest."

There was no need to add that last part, really, because he was always honest.

Even if Sunny was destined to forever remain a Master, he would not join the likes of Valor and Song. Sainthood was an alluring goal, but it was not worth selling himself into slavery to a Sovereign.

One chain, no matter how soft, was already enough.

As for the future… he really had no idea what was going to happen after the Antarctica Campaign was over. The Great Clans would clash in earnest, but by that point, their battles would most likely move to the Dream Realm.

Sunny would have liked to avoid becoming swept up in that conflict, but he had a strong suspicion that, for him, it was going to be nearly impossible.

"...There's no point in thinking about the future, either."

The four of them glanced at Cassie with surprise. She had remained silent throughout the conversation, but suddenly spoke at that precise moment. Coming from an oracle, that statement sounded a bit ominous.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, yeah? Why is that?"

Gently controlling the flying ship, Cassie kept quiet for a few moments. Then, a sad smile appeared on her face.

"There was no Spell a century ago. There were no Saints a few decades ago. There was no Chain of Nightmares a couple of years ago. What will happen in the future? Nobody knows. So, making plans is useless.

All we can do is prepare to face the unknown…"

Chapter-1156: Returning to the Shipwreck Island

Visiting the Southern Island was not as useful as Sunny had hoped it would be. Too much time had passed since the days when Nightmare guarded the abandoned castle, consumed by madness. The castle had long turned into ruins, and the land itself had been transformed by the Crushing.

However… Sunny did end up finding a clue. That clue was not on the island, but rather in what was not on the island — when he had visited this place as a favor to Noctis, there had been beautiful white flowers blooming in the emerald grass around the castle. But now they were gone.

Of course, there was nothing strange about some flowers disappearing after thousands of years of desolation. Nevertheless, Sunny remembered that he had seen these particular flowers elsewhere on the Chained Isles — there was a whole island covered by them.

That island was considered extremely dangerous, because there were numerous bones hidden beneath the beautiful carpet of white blossoms. Anyone who stepped on it would succumb to an overwhelming desire to sleep, never to wake up. Among the Awakened anchored in the Sanctuary, that island was synonymous with death.

There were too many connections for it to be a pure coincidence, and so, Sunny decided to visit the island of white flowers as well.

It was further east, however, so that stop was going to have to wait. First, the flying ship had to travel north and skirt the Tear for a while to reach the Shipwreck Island.

They spent two days making their way there. The ship had to stop once to give Cassie time to rest and restore soul essence. In the meantime, the rest of them made use of the idle time to enjoy some peace and quiet.

The ancient vessel turned into a leisure yacht for a few days. Nephis was in charge of cooking, while the rest of them were in charge of eating — they talked, enjoyed each other's company, and tried really hard to forget the cold dread of Antarctica for a few fleeting moments.

They even tried playing several games… sadly, it was hard to find a suitable one, considering that Kai always knew when someone was telling the truth, Cassie could sense the future, and Sunny was not above using his shadows to cheat.

In the end, they settled for competing to see who was the best cheater.

Nephis lost pretty much every game after that. Observing her try to hide her frustration was rather entertaining… at least for Sunny, who won the most.

'Ah, I have forgotten how awkward she really is. She's hiding it well these days… it's cute. Huh? Crude, I meant it's crude!'

Effie was still suffering from motion sickness and eating less than she usually did. Which meant only two to three times more than what a normal person would eat, naturally… luckily, the ship was attacked by a few Nightmare Creatures during their only stop so far, so they had plenty of fresh meat to feed her.

Kai was teaching Sunny how to play the flute.

It was… actually starting to feel like a vacation.

Eventually, they reached the Shipwreck Island.

It was exactly as it had been before, except for the fact that the feature that had given the island its name — the shipwreck — was now missing.

The corpse of the Sun Prince was still there, though.

The steel colossus was swinging forlornly below the island, its legs tangled in the remains of a torn heavenly chain. The first time Sunny had seen it, he wondered about what terrible creature could have killed the fearsome giant… who could have thought that it had actually been Cassie and Effie?

Well, technically, it had been someone else… but in the Nightmare, the immortal Chain Lord had fallen by their hands.

Nephis stared at the steel colossus for a long time. She had never seen it before, so he must have made an expression.

After a while, she asked:

"This is one of the immortals you killed?"

Effie tore her gaze away from the giant corpse and shivered.

"Yeah… this was where we fought the defenders of the Ivory City. The city itself is gone now, but that huge bastard is still here. See how his chest is cracked? That's because Cassie rammed him with the flying ship at full speed. Crazy girl. We all thought she died, for a minute or two."

Nephis lowered her head, while Effie sighed and added:

"It's hard to guess now, but that giant was filled with molten metal. Within that metal was a human-shaped cage… and within that cage was a thing that had once been a human. I pushed the bastard over the edge of the island, then crawled to its chest, and killed the thing inside. It was a hot mess of a situation. I had plenty of burns to prove it."

She made a disgusted face, then glanced at Sunny:

"So, doofus. We just need to bring you to what is left of the Sun Prince?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Yes… I mean, no. First, we need to get rid of the creature that lives below the island."

He had not forgotten about the terrifying abomination that was hidden on the dark side of the Shipwreck Island. The memories of watching its long, root-like tentacles stretch from the darkness shrouding the bottom of the isle and snatch Fallen Demons like flies were still fresh in his mind.

That was how the creature fed — it used the corpse of the Sun Prince as bait to devour Chain Worms.

Sunny shook his head.

But things had changed.

Back then, he had been a mere Awakened. A Corrupted Nightmare Creature had been synonymous with death, despair, and hopelessness… but now, he had killed more Corrupted abominations than he could be bothered to count.

Sunny had grown much more powerful. Even when compared to how he had been as a Master before Antarctica, he was incomparably stronger and more experienced. A mere Corrupted creature did not scare him anymore.

Which did not mean that it was wise to abandon caution. No matter how powerful he had become, one mistake was always all it took to perish in the Dream Realm.

Throwing one last glance at the swinging steel corpse, he turned away and said:

"Cassie, let's start lowering the ship."

Chapter-1157: Blood-Nourished Root

It would have been hard to fight the creature dwelling on the dark slide of the island in usual circumstances — after all, below it was the endless expanse of the dark abyss, and humans were not known for their ability to fly. Fighting a Corrupted abomination while hanging from the treacherous stone surface of the underside of the isle was a suicidal task.

Of course, there were ways to gain an advantage even in that situation. Kai, for example, could indeed fly. Sunny could assume the shadow fiend form, which was perfectly suited for just these kinds of battles. Effie was strong enough to dig a path to the creature from the surface in no time — and so on.

None of it was necessary today, though, because they had Cassie and the flying ship. The graceful vessel dove into the Sky Below and descended until the Shipwreck Island, as well as the creature hiding in its shade, was above them. They maintained a safe distance for now, but the main disadvantage was already erased.

Sunny peered into the darkness shrouding the bottom of the isle. There were large cavities in the stone and soil, making the whole island seem like a giant beehive. These caves were narrow and deep, and there was something hiding in their depths.

'Big…'

He did not have to rely on his eyes, though.

Cassie let go of the steering oars and stepped out of the runic circle, getting closer to the wooden railings. She observed the dark ravines for a while, then sighed.

"It is a Corrupted Monster. An old and powerful one."

The blind girl could perceive Aspects, Abilities, and Attributes of Awaweked… but that power allowed her to learn about Nightmare Creatures, too. Their strengths, their weaknesses, their nature — Cassie was an invaluable source of knowledge in that regard.

And knowledge was the origin of power.

She tilted her head a little.

"It is a plant abomination. Blood-Nourished Root. I… I have an idea of how it came to be."

The others looked at her with interest. Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"How would you know that?"

Cassie pointed at the mast of their ship.

"The enchantments of this vessel are meant to be powered by a sacred tree from Heart God's grove. I found a sapling to replace the original tree, which had died when the ship crashed… but I think it had not died immediately."

She thought for a few moments.

"The sacred tree must have survived the destruction of the vessel and rooted itself in the soil of the island. However, the Wormvine had been unleashed within the wreck. It grew and suffocated the tree, turning it into a corpse. The roots remained, though… and so did Solvane. Her blood seeped into the soil and was absorbed by the roots throughout the centuries.

Solvane did not succumb to the Corruption, but the roots did. That was how this monster was born."

A sigh escaped from Cassie's lips.

"In any case, it's vast and ancient, but weak to fire. We can burn the Root to ash without destroying the island."

After she said those words, everyone involuntarily turned to Nephis. Changing Star's expression did not change at all.

A moment later, she said:

"...I'll do it."

Sunny shook his head.

"No need."

He knew that Neph could slay the Blood-Nourished Root without too much trouble. She could also lend her flames to him or Saint… but that would require her to use her Aspect, which would trigger her Flaw.

For most Awakened, using their Aspects was as natural as breathing — especially so for Sunny, who always observed the world through his shadows. However, Nephis very rarely used her own. Strangers might not have noticed it, but anyone close to her knew that she only activated her Abilities during battles, and even then only the most dire ones.

That was how it had been on the Forgotten Shore, and that was how it was now. Usually, Neph relied on only her physical prowess and skill to fight.

Because she had to burn alive every time she called upon her powers.

So… what kind of vacation would it be, if she was forced to go through that suffering in the middle of it?

Sunny glanced at her and shrugged.

"Just summon the Dawn Shard. We'll deal with the creature ourselves."

Each Flaw was a curse, but theirs were curses of a different kind.

By his side, Effie sighed.

"Ah, hell."

A thin layer of polished metal suddenly covered her skin, making the huntress look like a beautiful steel statue. By her side, Kai summoned his ivory armor, as well as the Transcendent bow he had received after slaying the Corrupted Tyrant, Malignant Grave Root. An arrow that seemed to contain a sea of flames appeared on the black string.

Sunny himself summoned the Cruel Sight, which ignited with the incandescent glow of divine flame.

Nephis looked at them with a tense expression.

"...I can do it."

Effie smiled.

"Princess… at your age, you should really know the difference between can and should. Nobody is doubting that you can kill that monster. But just relax for once and let someone else have fun too, okay?"

With that, the huntress grinned and dashed to the edge of the deck. When she jumped, the enchanted lines shone a little brighter, as if straining to prevent the ancient wood from splintering because of the furious force of her push.

Effie shot through the darkness toward the underside of the island. As she flew, her steel skin suddenly started to shine, turning white-hot. Not a moment later, a massive root appeared from one of the caves and stretched towards the huntress — she twisted, avoiding being grabbed by it and landing on the long wooden tentacle instead.

Every spot her incandescent armor touched instantly started to burn.

More roots appeared from within the island.

Kai was already in the air, drawing the string of his black bow.

Sunny, however, was not moving yet.

With a grimace, he called upon the shadows clinging to the underside of the isle. They instantly surged forward, falling upon the roots like guillotine blades. The pressure on Effie and Kai was instantly

reduced.

Throwing a glance at Nephis, Sunny summoned the Dark Wing and smiled.

"Yeah, sorry. You'll have to sit this one out."

Then, he brandished the Cruel Sight and pushed himself off the deck.

…The battle did not last long.

Chapter-1158: Dinner is Served

"It stinks."

Effie once again looked like she was going to be sick, this time from all the smoke that drifted from inside the Shipwreck Island, where the charred remains of the Blood-Nourished Root were smoldering after being slain… by her.

Sunny scoffed.

"Look who's complaining."

He was playing with a Transcendent soul shard, but the huntress was the one who ended up with the real prize — there was a strange spear in her hand. Its shaft was made of grey wood, but the spearhead glinted with a deep crimson color, as if it had been cast in blood.

Effie made a face.

"Well, yeah. It's a good spear. The creature absorbed Solvane's blood, right? So it's like an inheritance from the greatest warrior of the sect. But, Sunny… what was the one question I asked you at the start of our trip?"

He frowned, trying to remember.

"Uh… whether the creature I needed to kill was edible?"

She pierced him with a bleak look.

"Exactly! And is it? No! What, am I supposed to gnaw on burned wood?"

Sunny laughed.

"Gods. Don't worry, we'll find something to feed you."

She simply waved her hand.

"Ah, don't bother. The smoke stench made me lose my appetite, anyway."

They were currently getting ready to climb down to the remains of the Sun Prince. A familiar golden rope was tied to a large piece of stone that must have been a part of a towering docking mast once, and the four of them — Sunny, Effie, Nephis, and Cassie — were standing near the edge of the island.

The flying ship was anchored to one of the masts, and Kai had already flown down to connect the other end of the rope to the remains of the heavenly chain. The island itself was in a descent phase, so they did not have to be wary of the Crushing any time soon, either.

"I'm going, then."

Sunny grabbed the rope and started climbing down.

Soon, they found themselves standing on the sole of one of the steel giant's feet. It was wide like a platform, and almost horizontal, making for a perfect landing spot.

Sunny had once seen a nightmare where he was one of Solvane's soldiers, fighting in a harrowing battle against the forces of the Ivory City. In that dream, he — and all of his comrades — had been mercilessly crushed beneath this sole. It was a bit strange, to be standing on top of it now.

'Life is weird like that, sometimes.'

The others looked at him expectantly.

"So, Sunny… are you going to tell us why we're here?"

Kai's usually composed voice was full of curiosity.

Sunny smiled.

"Ah, that. Yes… wait a second."

A moment later, a scrawny creature suddenly rose from his shadow. The little fiend opened his eyes wide and stared at the members of the cohort. His mouth hung open, revealing two rows of sharp, triangular teeth.

Nephis, Effie, Cassie, and Kai… they indeed made for an unforgettable sight. The former two were strikingly beautiful, while the latter two were simply beyond reason.

…Sunny wasn't so bad himself, either.

His friends focused on the Ravenous Fiend in turn.

"Sunny… what is that?"

Nephis looked down and moved her leg slightly, avoiding Imp's finger. The little bastard was so stunned that he tried to poke her, as if wanting to make sure that she was a real being and not a divine vision.

Sunny coughed.

"This ugly thing is a new Shadow of mine. I call him Imp."

Effie suddenly exploded in laughter.

"Oh… oh, this is too good! So the little gremlin has a mini version of himself now?"

Sunny glared at her.

"Funny you should say that, beanpole, because Imp is actually more of a mini version of you! It's always hungry, has no manners, and eats like a gluttonous barbarian!"

Both of them — Imp and Effie — looked at him with offended expressions.

He simply smiled.

"But, unlike Effie, this little guy actually profits from eating more than humanly possible. So… come one, trashling, chop-chop. You see this giant steel colossus? I want you to eat it whole."

The members of the cohort looked at Sunny with wide eyes.

Imp, meanwhile, looked down, at the surface of the steel sole. For the first time ever, his ugly face actually paled.

Sunny frowned.

"What are you waiting for? Start eating! Oh, but climb down first. If you start from the leg, you'll fall into the Sky Below. I did that once and survived, but a useless wretch like you will definitely die…"

The little fiend shivered, then threw a hateful glance at Sunny and obediently started climbing down. He acted with apparent reluctance, but his tiny eyes were secretly glinting with hungry avarice.

Sunny shook his head.

'This bastard… I bet he'll finish the whole colossus in less than three days…'

That much had to be enough to push the Ravenous Fiend to the next step of his nascent steel body, and maybe even a little past that. Sunny was also thinking about trying to make the Shadow swallow a few pieces of the heavenly chains.

He also remembered that there was a giant steel arm on the Iron Hand island — although the inhabitants of the Sanctuary would probably notice if it suddenly went missing.

At that moment, he realized that the members of the cohort were staring at him with strange expressions.

"...What?"

Kai hesitated for a few moments, then cleared his throat.

"Sunny, don't you think it would be nice to tell us a bit about Imp? And why is it that you want him to… eat… the Sun Prince?"

Effie nodded.

"Yeah… and how did you end up with that Shadow, anyway? From what you told us before, creating them requires a steep price to be paid. So why this weak, tiny creature?"

Sunny glanced at them with a dull expression.

"...Yeah, alright, I'll tell you. He needs to eat a lot of enchanted metal to get stronger. That tiny menace is a Transcendent Devil, by the way. In fact, he was the second most dangerous Nightmare Creature in the Antarctic Center. As for how he ended up becoming my Shadow — I killed that bastard, of course! Had him eaten alive by a bunch of carnivorous beetles.

It's actually a long story. Come… let's climb back, make some dinner, and I'll share this epic tale with you in detail…"

Chapter-1159: The Incredible Adventures and Astonishing Deeds of Heroic Dreamer Sunless in the Cold and Dreadful Darkness of the Long Night, Abridged (Volume V)

Strips of meat were roasting above the fire, and a delicious fragrance permeated the air. The remains of the Corrupted Monster crackled as they burned. Somewhere far away, ancient chains rattled loudly.

Darkness shrouded the world outside the circle of light cast by the dancing flames.

"... and that was the moment when the explosives detonated. Boom! I don't know how the whole city did not just slide into the ocean, but it was really something. The wall fell, the buildings crumbled to dust, the earth itself sank. Oh, but I did not see any of this, of course, because I was right in the middle of the explosion, protected only by a few layers of manifested shadows."

The members of the cohort were staring at Sunny with wide eyes… well, except for Cassie, of course. Nephis had been paying more attention to roasting the meat, but as the story went on, she seemed to become more and more distracted.

He grinned.

"And the Scavenger was right there with me! I couldn't let the wretch escape into the shadows, so I held on to him with one hand, and pommeled him with the other. At that distance, swords were of no

use, so he started biting. And let me tell you… his teeth were really, really sharp…"

Sunny smiled, revealing his own teeth, then suddenly made a ferocious face.

"But not as sharp as mine. I bit the bastard, too! At that point, the sphere of shadows was already breaking, and the heat inside was like an oven. It had survived the initial detonation, but got tossed around by the shockwave, and then rolled down into the crater before finally shattering."

His expression relaxed.

"Well, anyway. I came to my senses a bit faster than the Scavenger, who got pinned to the ground by some debris. Problem was, I still had no way of breaking his armor… luckily, I still had a chest full of the dark beetles with me. So, before the fiend could free himself, I poured the beetles out, and they ate him alive. A fitting end for a corpse eater, don't you think?

And since those beetles were not exactly living things, the Spell attributed the kill to me. So, that was how I received a new Shadow."

There was silence for a few moments. Eventually, Effie shook her head.

"Wait, wait… so you're telling us that this Ravenous Fiend stalked you across all of the Antarctic Center, infiltrated a siege capital, and waited for weeks to ambush you at the worst possible moment? Since when are Nightmare Creatures that smart?"

Kai glanced at her with surprise.

"Uh… are we just going to ignore the fact that Sunny killed a titan?"

Sunny laughed.

"Yes, that is exactly what happened. The first months of the operation were really wild, what can I say."

There was a startled pause. In the silence, Cassie asked in a worried

voice:

"But what happened to your soldiers? Were they alright? You said that the Ravenous Fiend gravely wounded one of them…"

Sunny's smile slowly faded away.

He stayed quiet for a few moments, then sighed.

"...Yeah. They were fine. Luster lost his legs, but he survived. He's currently back in the Northern Quadrant, recovering after receiving treatment from the best government healers. Kimmy is right here in East Antarctica, she is with Army Command now."

His eyes grew distant.

"Quentin… Quentin is still marked as missing in action, officially. As for Belle, Dorn, and Samara, they died a few days later. When we tried to fight the Winter Beast. Everyone died that day, except me and Jet."

In the silence that followed, Cassie sighed lightly.

"I'm sorry."

Sunny glanced at her sharply. It was strangely off-putting, to hear those words coming out of her mouth… he knew very well that she was not one for apologies.

'...Have I unknowingly been waiting for something stupid like that for the last couple of years?'

He shook his head, then put a smile on his face.

"Yeah… I'm sorry too. But that is how Antarctica is. It has a way of reminding you that no matter how strong you have become, there is always something stronger out there, waiting to eat you alive."

Sunny lingered for a bit, looked at Nephis, and said in a carefree tone:

"I've tasted a lot of failure there. It's a bitter thing, failure, but after

everything is said and done… I think it is more of a medicine than poison. You should try it too, sometime, before it's too late."

He did not know why he was being combative with Neph, but her confidence was really frustrating to observe recently. Perhaps… perhaps it was because he felt protective of her — Changing Star had put herself in terrible danger by joining Clan Valor, after all. She was facing death and destruction, but acted as if everything was under her control.

She was wrong. The Great Clans, the Sovereigns — these people were not someone who could be controlled.

Hearing his remark, Nephis calmly turned the meat and looked in Sunny's direction.

Her voice was even:

"I think I know more about failure than anyone here."

He frowned.

"You? When have you ever failed?"

Nephis sighed and continued tending to the meat.

"I failed to keep you by my side in the Dark City, didn't I? I failed to take control of the Bright Castle, too… I wanted to usurp Gunlaug's throne a few days after killing him. I had everything prepared, but in the end, it took many weeks of bloody struggle to achieve the goal. Each additional day that passed, each Sleeper that died fighting fellow humans… were my failures.

It wasn't easy to come to terms with."

She took the fragrant meat off the fire and started placing it on the plates.

"I failed in the Crimson Spire, too. I failed to achieve the best result, and even messed up in my attempt to salvage the mistake. And I have failed countless times since."

She smiled, then handed Sunny his plate.

"But that's alright. You said it yourself, failure might be bitter, but it is a medicine. Now, let's eat… hopefully, this meat will taste better."

Chapter-1160: Idle Days

They ended up spending three idle days on the Shipwreck Island.

It had long been cleansed of the feral Sailor Dolls by the Fire Keepers, and no new Nightmare Creatures made it their home since. The five Masters remained on the island when it was low, and sought shelter on the flying ship when it rose high enough to become affected by the Crushing.

Imp was devouring the steel colossus with startling speed while they rested and relaxed. Sunny had not had an opportunity to truly let go of his worries in a long, long time, so this change of pace was most welcome.

Vacationing in the Dream Realm was not really one's idea of fun, but they made the most of it.

Effie seemed to have regained her appetite, although she was still being picky about her food — it seemed that the military rations had left an unforgettable impression on the gluttonous huntress. As a result, the mountain of snacks she had brought over from the waking world was disappearing at a slower pace than the husk of the Sun Prince.

She even shared some with the rest of them, which was both pleasant and a huge shock.

The members of the cohort lazed around, avoided doing anything productive, and spent most of their time either sleeping or chatting idly.

Sunny shared more stories about his days in the Antarctic Center with them. The first weeks of scrambling to push back the hordes of abominations and establish the siege capitals, LO49, the first encounter with the Devouring Cloud, the Heart of Darkness, almost

getting killed by Goliath, the escape toward Falcon Scott and the long weeks of its siege…

He had thought that remembering these events would bring nothing but bitterness, but strangely, talking about them and sharing the memories of the people he had met — his soldiers, Beth and Professor Obel, the captains of the Irregulars, the defenders of Falcon Scott — was almost soothing.

Of course, these conversations inevitably veered more in the direction of discussing various Nightmare Creatures, battle strategies, and ways to kill the abominations better. The other members of the cohort had encountered countless enemies of their own in the time they were apart, so there was a lot of knowledge, insights, and accumulated experience to share.

The others talked about their lives, too.

Effie was having trouble being in charge of hundreds of people — although she was a competent battle commander, the idea of being in a position of leadership was alien to her. Luckily, Kai was usually nearby to give her support and advice. His experience serving as a centurion in the Sun Legion during the Nightmare was of tremendous help.

Sunny had a thing or two to say about being put in a position of power despite not wanting to carry that burden, as well. Cassie, meanwhile, was a wellspring of insight about the administrative and practical sides of managing a powerful force of Awakened. Needless to say, Nephis had a unique perspective on that topic, too, although she was as frugal with her words as ever.

Nevertheless, both Neph and Cassie did share a few things about how they were doing within Valor.

As it turned out, they were in a somewhat awkward position — the great clan was putting great expectations on Changing Star but, at the same time, did not trust her much yet. She had been treated with respect and favor, but also held at arm's length, prohibited from coming anywhere near the really important issues of the Domain.

She had only met Anvil once, and even then briefly. Sunny was immensely curious to learn about the King of Swords, but that conversation got sidetracked entirely by Kai, who looked at them with confusion and asked what kind of anvil they were talking about.

As it turned out, the handsome archer knew nothing about the Sovereigns. Learning that there were already Supremes living among humans was a shock to him.

Effie, on the other hand, had already known — she had received a few hints about this forbidden knowledge from her first cohort on the Forgotten Shore, and then pieced the rest together herself after coming back.

There had been a time when Nephis warned Sunny that simply knowing about the existence of the Sovereigns could cost him his life. However, their situation was completely different now. All five were not unknown entities in the Awakened society anymore — they were renowned Masters, universally considered potential pillars of the next generation.

In other words, they had earned the right to know some secrets. In fact, they had to know, because it made putting a leash on them easier.

So, Nephis shared more knowledge about the Domains with Kai and Effie. She did not tell them, though, about her suspicions about how her father had perished, how the great clans had hunted her in the past, and how she was determined to destroy them.

The two seemed to understand what was left untold, nevertheless, just like they had understood why Caster died by Sunny's hand without being explained the reasons in detail.

Armed with that knowledge, it became easier for them to realize what Neph's position was in the great clan Valor.

Paradoxically, Cassie's situation was a bit better — Valor was less wary of her, not considering the blind girl a serious threat. While the rest of the Fire Keepers had simply become retainers, she had received the title of a Seneschal — a high-ranking adviser, the

position that was second only to the Forgemasters among the non-combatant specialists of the great clan.

The war in Antarctica was the best chance for all of them — Nephis, Cassie, and the Fire Keepers — to improve their standing within Valor. Only after proving their loyalty on the battlefield would they receive the chance to get closer to the rulers of the great clan, including the enigmatic Sovereign.

'What a mess.'

Sunny was staring at the corpse of the Sun Prince, which was now missing its head, arms, and most of its torso. He could see the little figure of the Imp laying lifelessly on top of a link of a heavenly chain, looking miserable and drunk from overeating.

His remark was both about the state of the once-fearsome Chain Lord and the situation that Nephis and Cassie had found themselves in.

Shaking his head, Sunny leaned over the edge of the island and shouted:

"What are you doing, lazy waif?! Stop fooling around and eat more!"

Far below, Imp flinched, then looked up with a dull expression. Awkwardly climbing to his feet, the little fiend then sighed, made a face, and lifelessly took a bite out of the steel giant's leg.

'That's better…'

Imp chewed the ancient metal with a miserable expression, and then froze.

In the next moment, his scrawny body suddenly shimmered.

Chapter-1161: Blessed Steel

Even though there was a considerable chunk of the colossus left uneaten, Sunny ordered Imp to return. By the time the small creature climbed back to the surface of the island, the members of the cohort had gathered around Sunny.

"Huh? Wait… the little rascal looks different!"

Indeed, Effie was right. The scrawny fiend was different from how he had been before. Firstly, he had grown — just a few days ago, Imp was barely as tall as Sunny's knee, but now his head was on the same level as Sunny's abdomen.

The vital areas on his wiry body were now covered by black plates that resembled a suit of light armor, each glinting with a dark metallic sheen. The same went for his long, sharp claws and triangular teeth.

Imp's face twisted in a grotesque grin, and he raised his chin.

After that, the little fiend threw a furtive glance at Nephis.

Sunny smiled.

"Congratulations, ugly. You have officially graduated from an unseemly gremlin to an unsightly goblin."

Imp's grin grew a bit forced. He glared at Sunny and hissed.

Nephis looked at them for a few moments.

"...I don't know. I think he is a little cute."

The little fiend froze, then swelled with smugness.

Sunny shook his head and sighed.

"Are you blind? Well, whatever. Let's see what exactly changed…"

He summoned the runes, waited for the shimmering symbols to reveal themselves, and studied them with a focused expression.

Most of the runes seemed the same:

Shadow: Ravenous Fiend.

Shadow Rank: Transcendent.

Shadow Class: Devil.

Neither the Rank nor the Class had changed. So, the evolution must have been tied strictly to Imp's Attributes.

Sunny had anticipated such a result, so he was not too disappointed. Curious, he continued to read the runes:

Shadow Description: [A pitiful little creature…]

Shadow Attributes: [Lucky], [Marvel], [Ravenous], [Shadow Sworn], [Greater Steel Body].

Sunny tilted his head a little.

'Huh…'

This was good!

Before, Imp possessed an Attribute called [Lesser Iron Body]. Sunny had expected one epithet to change, but not both of them. Not only had "lesser" changed to "great", but "iron" had also become "steel."

That was a considerable leap.

'I wonder...'

The description of the [Lesser Iron Body] had implied that Imp's body possessed qualities of metal.

What about the [Greater Steel Body]?

He concentrated on the shimmering symbols and read:

[Greater Steel Body] Attribute Description: "This Shadow's body is akin to blessed steel."

'Jackpot!'

Not only had mundane iron been replaced by blessed steel — thanks to the Sun Prince, no doubt — but Imp's body had gone from merely possessing qualities of metal to being entirely like metal.

What did it mean? It meant that the little fiend's whole body was now as resilient as a weapon forged out of Transcendent steel would be.

In other words, nearly indestructible. More indestructible than the original Scavenger's already impregnable bone armor had been, at least.

Sunny was very satisfied. He had achieved his initial goal of toughening up the Ravenous Fiend. However, he still wanted to know just how tough his Shadow had become…

There was only one way to find out.

As Imp was puffing out his chest, Sunny smiled pleasantly and gave him a wholehearted kick.

In the next moment, there was a dull metallic ring and a piercing shriek.

"Ah! Goddammit! What the hell?! That hurts so bad!"

Jumping on one foot, Sunny cradled his other one and glowered at the scrawny fiend, who had fallen on his butt with a startled expression.

"Argh! Effie, whack this little bastard as hard as you can!"

Effie lingered for a moment, then gave him a composed look.

"...I'll do no such thing, you heartless despot. Come here, poor

thing… shall we bully your cruel master together? Ah, you're so adorable… in a hideous, nightmare-inducing kind of way…"

Sunny stared at the scene in front of him with wide eyes. What the hell was happening? Why was everyone treating the wicked little wretch so well?

'D—don't tell me…'

Did Imp's [Lucky] Attribute influence how people felt about him, as well?

'That must be it!'

The scrawny fiend, meanwhile, glanced at Sunny with a vindictive grin.

…But there was something wrong with it.

Suddenly, Imp's eyes and mouth shone with fiery orange-red light, which contrasted sharply against the black metallic shin of his face. Imp's sharp steel teeth had also been black a few moments ago, but now they were shining with a red-hot glow and radiated scorching heat. It was as though there was an immolating infernal furnace inside the little fiend's maw.

'What the…'

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then shifted his gaze quickly glanced at the runes.

There was a new string at the end of the Ravenous Fiend's Ability list.

Shadow Abilities: [Scavenger], [Devourer], [Shadow Step], [Internal Heat].

He concentrated on the last Ability without any delay.

[Internal Heat] Ability Description: "This Shadow's teeth and claws can be infused with annihilating heat, enhancing their cutting power."

Sunny froze for a moment.

'So, wait… this blessed steel gifted him not only with an affinity to metal, but also with an affinity to fire?'

And the little rascal had even received a new Ability out of it?

Well, it made sense… steel had to be tempered with fire, after all. And the Sun Prince had been drowned in molten metal before becoming the steel colossus, to atone for his perceived betrayal of Sun God's will.

Sunny glanced at the scrawny fiend and sighed.

"Alright, alright. Stop glowering. I won't hit you anymore… you did well, wretch!"

With that, he smiled and gave Imp a thumbs up.

The small Shadow hesitated for a few moments, then jumped to his feet. The scorching red glow radiating from his teeth slowly disappeared. He looked very proud of himself.

Sunny nodded.

"Good. Ah, just look how tough and strong you've become!"

Imp puffed out his chest again, listening as Sunny added:

"...I just can't wait to send you to fight all kinds of dreadfully powerful Nightmare Creatures!"

Slowly, the arrogant expression on the scrawny fiend's face was replaced with one of concern and distress.

Sunny smiled wickedly.

"Yes, yes... with a body like that, you won't be damaged too badly even if a titan chews on you a bit..."

Chapter-1162: Old Haunts

After Imp developed the [Greater Steel Body], there was no reason for them to remain on the Shipwreck Island. He had already absorbed everything he could from the body of the Sun Prince, so devouring the rest of the colossus was of no benefit. The need to visit the Iron Hand Island had disappeared, as well.

Their vacation was slowly coming to an end.

They still had a few days left, though, as well as plans to visit a few more isles.

The flying ship cut across the starlit sky, moving east.

Their first destination was the Temple of the Chalice. The ancient ruin was just like the last time Sunny had visited it — forlorn and empty. Even the wrathful specters that had populated the temple were gone.

Of course, he knew more about how the maiden priestesses had perished now.

Standing in the central chamber, Sunny looked at the shattered remains of the stone chalice and the bones littering the floor. The walls of the sacred hall had collapsed, the stone plates were cracked by a devastating explosion. After thousands of years, nothing but dust and desolation remained.

He wondered about fate and the past. In the Nightmare, he had been the one to destroy the Chalice and slay the warmaidens… however, even without Sunny, their end had been the same.

Who had killed the priestesses of the Red Sect in real past? Was it Noctis himself, or someone else? What had happened to the child whose body Effie inhabited in the Nightmare? Had the little girl been

slain in the massacre, too?

As usual, there were no answers.

Effie herself wandered the ruins alone, her face uncharacteristically somber. The swords she had thrust into the ground once were all gone. The memories she carried, however, remained.

Eventually, the huntress sighed and shook her head in dejection.

"All that cruelty was pointless, in the end. What… what a waste."

Sunny remained silent, consumed by his own thoughts.

This place held special meaning to him, too. This was where he had become a Demon. It had only happened a couple of years ago, and yet, those years felt like a lifetime. A few lifetimes, really.

Was it because of the Nightmare or because of Antarctica that the past seemed so distant?

They left the Temple of the Chalice behind and ventured to their next destination.

On the island covered by white flowers, Sunny found Nightmare — the real Nightmare. Or rather, what was left of him.

After stepping foot into the field of flowers, Sunny swiftly succumbed to slumber. In the dream he was pulled into, a shapeless wraith appeared and instantly attacked him, burning with murderous madness and frenzy. It could have been dangerous for anyone else, but Sunny had too much experience fighting dreams. Nightmare the Shadow was also by his side, protecting him.

Together, they battled the frenzied wraith and vanquished it.

The wraith was not the real Nightmare — it was just a malignant echo left at the place where he had died. After waking up from the slumber, Sunny explored the island of flowers and found the remains of an enormous horse in its center, beautiful blossoms covering the white bones and growing through the holes in its skull.

He did not know how the black steed had ended up on this island and how it had died. Had it succumbed to the Corruption, or had it remained steadfast until the end?

All he knew was that the white flowers grew where Nightmare's blood had been spilled.

His loyal Shadow stared at the ancient bones for a while, then blew the air out of his large nostrils loudly and turned away with a solemn look.

They had not gained much from this trip, but the dark steed seemed to have subjugated a powerful nightmare, adding it to his collection. The counter of the Dream Curse had risen significantly after slaying the dream wraith.

The last stop they made was on the island where the creature of the lake had once bestowed the Ruby Knife to Cassie.

The island was very close to the Sanctuary, and was known as an extremely dangerous one. Even when Awakened dared to cross it, they always stuck to the edge of the isle, never approaching the tranquil lake — Sky Tide herself had been known to avoid this place.

Whether it had been because the abomination living in the lake was too powerful, or because Saint Tyris had chosen to keep it there to prevent other Nightmare Creatures from drawing close to the Citadel, no one knew.

Despite the danger, Cassie calmly landed the flying ship on the tranquil surface of the lake and let go of the steering oars. When Sunny gave her a questioning look and an awkward cough, the blind girl simply shook her head.

"Don't worry. We'll be safe until the Crushing subsides."

Not daring to leave the ship, they gathered on the deck and watched the calm water. At some point, Cassie unsheathed the Quiet Dancer, gently touched its blade, and then let go of the slender rapier.

It flew straight up and then plunged into the water, straining under the weight of the Crushing.

A long time passed in silence. At some point, Cassie lowered her head and let out a heavy sigh.

"...It's empty. It's gone."

Soon, the Quiet Dancer emerged from under the clear water and flew up with a flourish, sparkling brightly as the sunlight reflected from the drops covering its slender blade.

The rapier landed in Cassie's hand and grew still. Sheathing the Echo, the blind girl silently went back to the runic circle and sent the ship into the sky. Her face seemed full of sorrow, for some reason.

Despite the fact that they were practically next to the Sanctuary, none of them wanted to visit it. The idea of the familiar Citadel without the White Feather clan seemed strange to Sunny. He didn't know who had been sent by Valor to oversee the Chained Isles instead of Saint Tyris, and did not care to find out.

Even though it was not their fault, the newcomers still felt like usurpers.

Instead of venturing into the Sanctuary, the flying ship turned around and flew back west, cutting a straight line toward the distant Red Colosseum.

It was going to take them a few days to return to the Ivory Tower.

Once they did, the small vacation would be officially over, and Sunny would have to dive back into the coldness of Antarctica and the dirty war of the great clans.

He felt slightly reluctant to return.

On the last night before they reached the Tower, Sunny found himself standing on the deck of the ancient vessel, looking at the myriad of stars above them through the branches of the sacred tree.

There was the sound of steps, and Nephis approached to keep him company in silence.

Together, they watched the night sky and thought about the future.

What it would bring, what it would take...

What it would cost them.

Chapter-1163: Broken Land

After a long time spent in comfortable silence, Sunny glanced at Nephis, thought for a few moments, and asked:

"So, what do you make of this place?"

The other members of the cohort all had a deep connection to the Chained Isles. Sunny and Cassie had spent the most time here, but Effie and Kai were also deeply tied to the remains of the Kingdom of Hope. Their experiences in the Nightmare were not something one could ever forget.

It was a place that had changed them.

Nephis, on the other hand, was a stranger here. She could look at the Chained Isles as an outsider.

So, he was idly curious about her perspective.

Neph lingered for a while, then said quietly:

"It is as everywhere else. Broken."

Sunny smiled.

"I guess. The Chained Isles are more honest in that regard, aren't they? They don't hide their broken nature."

Indeed, the Dream Realm was a ruined world.

…The waking world was a ruin, too.

And the young woman standing next to him was the Star of Ruin. A fitting name for someone born of two broken worlds.

He sighed.

"Still, I thought you would have more of an opinion. Don't you feel a connection to this land?"

Nephis glanced at him with a bit of confusion.

"Why would I?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Well, the Kingdom of Hope was destroyed by Sun God. He brought his fire down, and obliterated it. You are the inheritor of that fire, are you not? Sun God's blood is flowing through your veins. So, in a sense, you are the last descendant of the being who brought ruin to this land."

Nephis remained silent for a while, then smiled.

"I see. Yes, it would make sense for me to feel a connection to Sun God. But, actually… in this case, I feel more connected to Hope."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Hope? The wicked demon who spent a thousand years twisting the minds of everyone living in the ruins, driving them insane, and causing all kinds of unspeakable, abhorrent evil? The vile queen of madness, that Hope?"

Neph tilted her head a little. She lingered for a few moments, and then said:

"Hope who had everything that belonged to her destroyed by an impossible foe. Who remained chained for a thousand years, but never stopped trying to set herself free. Who escaped her prison and waged war against the eternal gods. And killed them. That Hope."

Sunny hid his smile.

"Huh. Well, if you put it like that… actually, I'm rather fond of Hope, too. I met her once, you know?"

For the first time in a long time, he saw Neph's usually calm expression crack a little. She looked at him with a startled expression.

"You… you met Hope? The Demon of Desire?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. Well… a version of her, at least. At the very end of the Nightmare, I entered the Tower and saw her, for a few fleeting moments. She even spoke to me."

He hesitated for a few moments.

"She told me that the daemons were the Flaw of the gods. I'm not sure what she meant, though. I always assumed that the gods were flawless."

Nephis frowned, then turned away and looked at the stars.

"...I heard that the gods were perfect beings once, but then they were no more. It doesn't make a lot of sense, does it? I also don't know what she meant."

She remained silent for a while, then said evenly:

"It makes me wonder, though. Did Sun God also have to pay a price to use his power? Did he have to burn? Did he have to suffer? Did it hurt him to destroy Hope's kingdom?"

Nephis looked at the distant stars with a cold expression.

"The gods could die, so they must have suffered, too."

She stared at the black sky.

Then, slowly, a pale smile appeared on her lips.

"...I hope he suffered a lot."

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Eventually, they returned to the Ivory Island.

The sun was disappearing beyond the horizon, and the crescent moon became visible in the twilight sky. The five of them gathered on the shore of the clear lake, in front of a bonfire, to enjoy their last meal

before their return to the waking world.

The short respite was almost over.

Sunny enjoyed the last of Neph's cooking he would taste in a while as he studied the faces of his companions — Nephis, Cassie, Effie, Kai… the shadows moved as the fire danced, painting them in shades of orange and grey. They seem rested and relaxed.

He felt at peace, too.

After a while, Sunny turned his head to look at the lake, where the flying ship swayed gently on the surface of the water. A small frown appeared on his face.

"...Hey. We still haven't come up with a name for that thing, have we?"

The others looked at him with confusion. Then, their expression cleared.

"Oh!"

Kai was the first one to speak. He thought for a few moments, and then smiled.

"How about Sky Swimmer?"

Sunny gave him a measured look, making the handsome archer hesitate.

"What?"

He shook his head.

"No, no. Don't pay me any attention. I just think I understand now how your band ended up being called Night&Gale…"

Both Kai and Nephis blinked.

"What's wrong with Night&Gale?"

"Night&Gale is an amazing band name!"

Sunny smiled crookedly.

"Alright, alright! There's nothing wrong with that name. Still, Sky Swimmer? Doesn't sound too majestic."

Kai looked down in embarrassment.

"Oh, well… on second thought, you're right…"

At that moment, Effie spoke:

"I have a great name in mind."

Everyone turned to her, while the huntress threw a mischievous glance at Sunny.

"This is a flying ship, right? It soars high in the sky, bathing in sunlight. So… how about… we call it The Sunfull?"

The corner of Sunny's eye twitched.

"...Next suggestion."

Cassie hesitated for a few moments.

"I really don't know. I would like to name it in honor of Noctis, but at the same time… this is the vessel of the Fire Keepers now. It was created to harvest divine flames, and in the future, it will be the symbol of Changing Star and her people. Do we name it for the past, or for the future?"

Everyone looked at Nephis, who remained silent for a while. Eventually, she said:

"Let's honor your friend, Noctis. Sunny knew him the best, so he's the best person to give the ship a name."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

'How come I ended up being the one to do it?'

Still… it wasn't the bad kind of responsibility.

He thought about Noctis, his self-proclaimed best friend, and about what Noctis had wanted.

…To break the will of gods and set Hope free from her chains.

He also thought about Odysseus, and about his own desperate desire to be free.

He thought about what Noctis had achieved.

Who was Noctis, in the end? What words described him best?

'That lying, dastardly cheat...'

After a while, Sunny let out a sigh and nodded.

"Yeah. I think I know. I have a good name."

He looked at the graceful silhouette of the ancient ship and remained silent for a few moments.

Eventually, Sunny said:

"...Chain Breaker. Let's call it that."

Chapter-1164: Nice Summer Day

…It was a hot, lazy summer day. The sun bathed the Northern Quadrant Siege Capital in heat and light, making people long for the cool shade of the ventilated buildings. The sky was clear and vast, without a single cloud in sight. Looking at its blue expanse, it was hard to believe that somewhere far away people were suffering in the darkness, assaulted by cold and dread.

The Chain of Nightmares that was raging in the Southern Quadrant seemed so distant here.

On that peaceful day, a young man in expensive clothes was sitting on a bench in a beautiful park. Located in one of the more affluent districts of the city, the park was full of vibrant greenery and pleasant shade. The filtered air was crisp and clean. Everything here looked spotless and new.

The young man was enjoying a cup of coffee as he watched children play on a nearby playground. There was an absent-minded smile on his handsome face.

He seemed to be in a pleasant mood.

'How curious…'

The young man observed the children. They were so strange, so innocent.

Fragile.

It would take no effort at all to break them.

…But why would he?

Watching the kids play was interesting and nice.

And yet, he couldn't help but imagine what the playground would look like painted with their blood. Those images entered his mind on their own.

The images were interesting and nice, too.

'Are all human children like that?'

The young man had been a child himself, once, but he did not really remember much about that time. He knew that he had been a timid kid who did not start to speak until he was four — others made sure that he knew that. At some point, the old man came to claim him.

The rest of his childhood had been spent in the Dream Realm. It was only much later, after the old man had discarded him, that he returned to the waking world.

The waking world had felt alien then, and felt a bit alien still.

But really, it was the young man who was the alien.

'Am I the strange one? Huh.'

It might have been an easy conclusion to draw, but it was not so easy for the young man. He had trouble imagining that others were different from him. It took a conscious effort to remember.

At some point, there was a slight disturbance. One of the kids kicked a ball too hard, and it flew toward the young man, almost making him spill his coffee.

The young man looked at the ball with displeasure.

The culprit of his displeasure ran over and stopped a couple of steps away, looking at him with wide eyes.

"Oh! S—sorry, mister…"

The kid was tiny and cute. He was maybe five years old, with blonde hair, smooth skin, and blue eyes. He also had short legs, which made his run look rather comical.

His neck seemed very thin and malleable.

The young man smiled.

"No problem. Ah, you speak so well. I couldn't speak that well at your age."

The kid beamed with a bright smile.

"I go to classes! Mommy takes me. I know alphabet, too!"

The young man tilted his head.

"Oh? Is your mom here?"

The kid nodded enthusiastically.

"She's over there!"

Then, a complicated expression appeared on his little face.

"...Are you mom here too, mister?"

The young man stared at the kid silently.

"No. I'm here all by myself."

The child looked at him with pity.

"Oh. I'm sorry. Don't be sad…"

The young man's smile widened.

"I'm never sad. I can't be sad."

The kid stared at him awkwardly, failing to understand the strange words.

"Uh… can I have my ball back, mister?"

The young man leaned forward and said:

"Of course. But first, answer me a question. That game you and your

friends are playing… what is it called?"

The child seemed surprised.

"Uh, mister… that's football. Have you never played football?"

The young man lingered for a few moments.

"No. There were no other kids where I grew up. I think I would have been great at football, though. Ah… maybe I should become a kid and play some football, what do you think?"

His voice sounded as if he was genuinely contemplating doing just that.

The kid smiled, thinking that it was a joke. The young man smiled, too, then pushed the ball toward the child, glanced at him one last time, and leaned back.

The kid picked up the ball and shouted:

"Thank you, mister!"

With that, he turned around and ran back to his friends.

The young man did not respond.

In fact, he did not move at all.

His eyes were closed, as though he was enjoying a nap in the sun.

…A few hours later, long after the children and their mothers left, a woman taking a walk in the park passed the bench.

A frightened scream suddenly disturbed the peaceful day.

"Gods! Somebody, help! D—dead, he's dead!"

Indeed, the young man was as cold as a corpse.

He was, and had been, dead.

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Of course, Mordret was long gone, hiding in the eyes of the talkative kid. Extinguishing a mundane human's soul was easier than… well, taking candy from a baby… but he had not taken the body of this child.

He was just taking a ride, watching the world through the kid's eyes.

Currently, they were walking back home, holding the kid's mother's hand.

The woman was in her early thirties, and very attractive. She was wearing expensive, but simple clothes — of course, anyone who lived in the affluent district had the means to afford the best attire, but few were dignified enough to not flaunt their wealth.

Every time the woman glanced at her son, she smiled warmly, which made Mordret feel a slight sense of amusement.

He had no memories of his own mother, who had died in childbirth when he was young, so this experience was rather new.

Being loved by someone was interesting and nice, too.

Enough to make him want to kill the child and take his place.

But Mordret didn't.

Even a creature like him had principles, after all.

Well… not principles. Inclinations, maybe.

He was not inclined to kill someone without a decent reason, even if he wanted to.

Of course, his definition of what constituted a decent reason was different from the norm.

...Hiding in the kid's eyes, Mordret entered his home, uninvited.

Chapter-1165: Warmth of Affection

Human homes were like a titan.

They were full of countless things. From the floor panels to the smallest trivialities, each thing had been designed and created by someone. The materials used in the creation of the things had been produced by someone else. Vehicles that someone had assembled transported them over roads that someone had built.

The amount of effort and life hiding in each human home was staggering. The scale of it was so inconceivable that Mordret could only compare it to something he was more familiar with — an abomination so vast that its mere existence was a calamity.

But really, the waking world was so much more than that. The only creature it could truly be compared to was a god.

'A dead god, maybe.'

Humans were like ants, but he could easily imagine them as carrion worms wriggling as they feasted on a divine corpse.

He could imagine it vividly.

"Honey! Come eat!"

Mordret was looking at the world through the child's eyes.

He put down his toys and ran to the kitchen. He climbed on a chair and grinned at his mother. He made a face at the plate full of expensive, naturally grown vegetables and pouted.

He allowed himself to be coaxed into eating some.

'...I can't taste it.'

Mordret felt a slight disappointment as he studied the mother's face. She was looking at him with a smile. Her eyes were brimming with affection.

Being loved by someone was a novel feeling. But what would it feel like to love someone instead?

Curious, Mordret thought about taking the mother's body and caring for the kid. Would it feel rewarding? Would it feel burdensome? Would it feel nice?

There was an easy way to find out.

However, Mordret stifled his curiosity and remained still.

As the kid chewed on the vegetables, the mother idly listened to the news. There was a propaganda report on the screen, with a dignified male voice delivering a report:

"...With the Second Evacuation Army en route to the Southern Quadrant, the heroic warriors of the First Evacuation Army are continuing to consolidate their forces on the continent. Just a few days ago, the relocation of refugees from the impregnable siege capital of Falcon Scott was successfully concluded.

Under the valiant leadership of Saint Tyris of the White Feather clan, the casualties among the rank and file of the army were minimal…"

Mordret smiled at the mention of a familiar name. Sky Tide was still alive, it seemed. He was satisfied… among all the Saints he wished to kill, she was the only one who deserved a clean death.

She had indirectly helped him get caught. But she had also indirectly helped him escape. So…

'Maybe I won't have to kill her at all.'

For the next few days, Mordret lived the life of a human child. He experienced the heat of summer, the warmth of being cared for by a loving mother, the delight of playing with friends, and the excitement

of learning letters with a tutor.

It was all fun, but he quickly grew bored.

'The other would have loved it, though.'

Feeling his mood turn dangerous at the thought, he chased it away.

Mordret was sincere when he told the kid that he never felt sad. But he was not completely emotionless. There were things he could feel: satisfaction, contentment, pleasure… anger, resentment, contempt…

And hatred, of course.

And although he hated his traitorous father and Asterion, he hated the other the most.

'Ah. No sense in thinking about it.'

He focused his attention back on the present.

The kid he dwelled within was rather stupid, as expected from a child. The child only saw the mother's smile, but Mordret saw what was hidden behind it.

Worry. Fatigue. Loneliness. Fear.

After a few days of idle observation, he left the child and hid within the mother's eyes.

…Life was not all warmth and joy from her perspective. She put on a brave face when she was with her son, but when left alone, the woman allowed herself to be weak and scared.

The city was in turmoil. Everything was changing. The distant war was already affecting the daily lives of the citizens… her friends, her neighbors, her family — everyone was tense, as if waiting for a storm.

Many people had left with the First Evacuation Army. Even more enlisted and sailed away with the Second.

And now, there was talk of even people from her immediate circle being pulled into the whirlwind of the distant cataclysm.

The woman was not a low-ranking citizen. Her status was special, and so, she knew better than to believe the propaganda.

Mordret observed, absorbing her point of view.

On one sunny morning, the woman received a call. Her face brightened as she brought the communicator to her ear.

"...Yes! I see. That is… that is wonderful news. How long before… oh. That soon? Yes, I understand.

He is doing great. He misses you, of course. Don't worry… I'll explain. We are very proud of you! Can I… can I come see you? Oh, that's wonderful.

Yes… I'll be there…"

After finishing the call, the woman lowered her hands and remained motionless for a few moments. Her lips trembled.

Then, she took a deep breath and put a calm expression on her face.

The woman got ready, putting much more effort than usual into looking nice. Her already unmistakable beauty bloomed even more.

After putting on her favorite dress, she smiled at herself in the mirror and left the apartment.

…Of course, Mordret, who was looking at the world through her eyes, did the same.

'How sweet.'

Instead of using public transportation, they summoned an expensive PTV and traveled to an even more luxurious and well-defended part of the city. There, at the very heart of NQSC, a vast complex that resembled a hybrid between an embassy and a fortress lay, large enough to be considered a district of its own.

The woman exited the PTV and approached the security checkpoint. There, an Awakened warrior wearing particular colors — black and vermilion — stopped her with a polite gesture.

She smiled.

"Good morning. I am here to see my husband…"

Chapter-1166: Homecoming

The woman had no trouble passing the security checkpoint.

...Just like that, Mordret entered the stronghold of the great and powerful clan Valor.

His birthplace.

It felt fascinating to come back here. Mordret did not exactly consider this place his home, but he remembered it well. Not from when he had lived here during early childhood, but from the time he spent here right after coming back from the Dream Realm.

He had been twelve… or was it thirteen?... and already an Awakened. Reaching Bastion first, and then coming to this beautiful place.

Everything in the waking world had felt soft, but his return…

Was not at all like he had imagined.

As memories flashed in his mind, Mordret felt a dark, suffocating emotion rise from the depths of his soul.

'Now is not the time.'

Infiltrating the stronghold was already a risk. He could not allow himself to act rashly… his family were no fools. They had safeguards in place to detect him, and it had taken a lot of effort to make this moment possible.

If there was one thing Mordret was good at, it was remaining cold and calculating.

So, no matter how much he wanted to let go, he had to hold himself back.

These people were not his enemies, anyway. They were just servants… the masters were safely hidden away behind much more impenetrable defenses.

The child and the woman he had been observing for the past couple of weeks were not random people, of course. They were the son and the wife of an Awakened retainer of the great clan Valor. Usually, a family like that would have resided within the fortress itself, but with the warrior spending most of his time in the Dream Realm, the woman wanted to live closer to her family.

That was a vulnerability which Mordret had planned to exploit.

And now, he was inside the complex, hiding in the woman's eyes as she hurried to meet her husband.

She seemed to be familiar with the compound, easily navigating between the multitude of buildings, training grounds, and parks. The stronghold was perfectly maintained, picturesque, and tranquil… at least on the surface.

Behind the beautiful facade, however, hid explosive tension.

The great clan Valor was preparing for war.

The woman did not seem worried about that. All she worried about was her husband.

Mordret was touched.

'Love for her child, love for her partner… she is just full of affection, without a second thought. How peculiar.'

After spending some time with this family, he couldn't help but feel a little attached.

Eventually, the woman made her way to a particular building. There, rows of sleeping pods were stationed in heavily defended rooms. There were some living quarters, as well, and that was where her husband was waiting.

Upon seeing him, she beamed with joy. A bright smile appeared on

the man's face, too.

"You're here!"

Without wasting any time, they embraced.

The husband seemed like a nice enough fellow, if a little too earnest. As an Awakened serving the great clan Valor, he had a lot of privileges, but also a lot of duties. Awakened retainers had to spend long months in the Dream Realm, protecting Bastion or one of the other Citadels under Valor's control. Sometimes, they were sent on dangerous missions.

Sometimes, they did not return.

Even though these were some of the best fighters of the human race, the Dream Realm was the Dream Realm. No one was safe there, least of all mere Awakened.

It was not a surprise that the woman's life was full of fear and worry.

'Poor thing...'

Their reunion was sweet, but sadly brief. Even though the Awakened had just returned to the waking world, he was not coming home. Instead, he was preparing to embark on a new mission.

Mordret listened with a faint smile.

"...it is a great honor. And opportunity, of course. Saint Madoc himself is coming with us. Even Lady Morgan will be there… if I can distinguish myself in front of them, then even receiving the support of the elders to become a Knight won't be out of the question! You know that I am well-respected among the men… all I need is one last push. Can you imagine how our lives will change if I Ascend?

I won't be gone that often, too..."

The woman smiled, but Mordret could feel her apprehension.

She hid it well, though, not wanting to burden her husband.

"Of course… of course. Just… be careful, okay? I hear terrible things about Antarctica."

The man smiled.

"Why are you comparing us to those pitiful dogs? The people serving the government can barely be called Awakened. But we are the warriors of Valor."

Mordret was delighted.

He had thought that he would have to jump between dozens of people to find someone assigned to the Southern Quadrant expedition force. How lucky was he to stumble on a suitable person so soon?

From the son, to the mother, to the father… it was so quick.

The Awakened and his wife talked, expressing their affection for each other. But then, inevitably, they had to part ways.

When the beautiful woman left to return to her child, Mordret remained in the man's eyes.

He was going to Antarctica.

For the next several weeks, he remained hidden in the Awakened warrior's eyes, perceiving the world through them. He trained. He prepared. He thought about his wife and his son.

Slowly but surely, the expedition force was gathered and readied itself to go to war. The summer ended, and autumn embraced the world.

The man was excited, but also nervous. He steeled himself to what was about to come.

Mordret did, too.

On the day when they were supposed to embark on the journey across the ocean, he prayed to the dead gods. Then, knowing that there might not be an opportunity to do so later, he sent a sweet message to his wife.

Finally, he saluted Saint Gilead, the Summer Knight, and followed the noble Transcendent onto a ship.

'This man has a beautiful wife, and a cute son. He truly is fortunate.'

Mordret remembered the days he had lived in the Awakened warrior's home with fondness.

…On the first night at sea, he snuffed out the man's soul, and took his place.

Chapter-1167: Prince's New Clothes

Taking someone's place was not a new experience for Mordret.

However, it was a perilous thing every time.

…Not that he minded.

He had been very weak at the start of it all. Unlike most other members of his family, Mordret had not received an Aspect that helped one in a direct confrontation. He was not like his father, his uncles and aunts, or his cousins.

He was not like Morgan, who had been born on the battlefield and was made stronger, faster, and more resilient after Awakening.

He was not even on par with that amusing scoundrel, Sunless.

His physical strength was, objectively, laughable.

It had gotten somewhat better now that Mordret reached a higher Class, but that was his limit. That level was not nearly enough to face the caliber of threats he was facing, and there was no other way to bolster his combat prowess without the use of Memories.

However, he could not use Memories within someone's soul. He could only reflect what was already there.

As a Sleeper, Mordret had been able to see through reflections, as well as travel through them — both mentally and physically. He had also been gifted with the ability to create helpers by shattering his soul. Of course, back then, gaining a new soul core to create a Reflection had not been easy.

Mirror Beast… Beastie… was his first creation. Human children had imaginary friends, but Mordret had Beastie instead. For a lonely child who had grown up in the Dream Realm, having a companion — even if it was a mindless dormant beast at first — was meaningful beyond words.

His Mirror Beast was gone now, though.

That was another thing his family had to pay for.

In any case, things had changed after he Awakened by anchoring himself to a Citadel. Mordret had received his second Ability, which made people wary of him… among other things. That was because he could enter their souls through their eyes, and destroy them.

The problem was that he had to defeat the soul first.

During a soul battle, Mordret could rely only on his own prowess and on reflecting the power of the soul he was invading. Defeat meant death, even for him — just like he had almost perished when trying to take the body of Sunless.

Ah, what a thrilling memory that was.

Mordret's Aspect was of no help in a battle, while the Awakened whose souls he invaded generally possessed a great mastery of their Aspects and tools. He, on the other hand, had no experience using them. So, to win and survive, Mordret had to gain a better understanding of the enemy's power than the enemy possessed, usually in a matter of seconds.

It was like giving a novice a sharp sword and sending them into a duel to the death against a veteran swordsman who had been honing their skill for many years.

The corrupted souls of Nightmare Creatures were even more deadly, albeit for other reasons.

So, how did he win?

By being better. By being smarter, by having greater skill, by possessing a deeper understanding of combat.

By breaking and manipulating his opponent, dismantling their confidence, and turning their strengths against them.

There was no trick to it, just will.

It was not easy… and yet, Mordret had not perished yet.

Oh, and it was also fun.

The best way to win a soul battle, however, was to prepare.

If he created an opportunity to study the enemy in advance, to learn the details and intricacies of their Aspect, then he did not have to enter a soul battle blindly. It was even better if he had managed to shake the enemy, making their soul weaker.

So, taking the body of the Awakened warrior after boarding the ship had not been too hard. Mordret had been looking at the world through his eyes for weeks, after all. He even knew the names and faces of his wife and son… actually, he might have known those two better than the man himself did.

'That's better.'

Looking at the face of the man in the mirror, Mordret smiled.

Then, he erased that smile and replaced it with another, much more earnest and bright one.

That was how the man had smiled.

Mordret effortlessly changed his posture, his facial expression, the glint in his eyes, the subtle tension in his shoulders. His whole presence changed, becoming indistinguishable from how the dead man had held himself.

Looking into the mirror with that new smile on his face, Mordret whispered with flawless sincerity:

"Glory to the great clan Valor!"

***

Mordret enjoyed a journey across the sea in the company of the other Awakened warriors of Valor. He trained, ate, and spent the rest of his time with these people.

He liked them a lot.

The stoic Awakened Crass, the good-natured Awakened Agathe, the carefree Awakened Varo, and the other members of his cohort…

The sense of camaraderie they shared was curious and delightful. The respect and admiration they felt toward the man whose body Mordret was wearing was refreshing, too. It made him feel a bit of responsibility for these people, which was a novel experience.

Even Saint Gilead was not unpleasant to be around.

'I wonder how things are going in the Southern Quadrant…'

By now, the emissaries of Song had already arrived there. Seishan's bloodbag, Bast, must have already begun producing the mirrors.

There was no real point to those mirror, of course. It was just something senseless Mordret had instructed them to do, in order to add fuel to the flame of his family's suspicion.

The man was most likely going to be eliminated, at some point, but that was no great loss to the great clan Song.

Why would Mordret care?

Then, finally, a dark line appeared on the horizon.

The convoy had reached Antarctica.

Standing on the deck of a massive battleship, Mordret looked at the grey sky and felt the cold wind caressing his face. The Call of Nightmare assaulted his mind, filling it with a cacophony of maddening whispers.

He sighed.

'What a dreary place…'

As he contemplated the view in front of him, a familiar voice called out:

"Warren! Get ready. We are docking in half an hour."

Turning around, he looked at his comrades and smiled.

"Don't be foolish, Agathe. A warrior of Valor is always ready!"

Chapter-1168: Familiar Faces

There was a furious battle. Saints and Titans clashed, making the ground shake and the sky shatter. A boundless horde of Nightmare Creatures flowed like a sea of darkness, assaulting the formation of human soldiers. A massive tortoise Echo towered above the battlefield, with a stone fort standing on its impregnable shell.

Mordret fought in the battle. Limited to the power level of an Awakened, he drowned in the tide of abominations, slaying one after another as he protected the lives of his fellow warriors. Thanks to his swift sword, none of the members of his cohort fell.

They were victorious.

After the battle, awash in the blood of Nightmare Creatures, his companions looked at him with triumphant glee.

"Warren! Gods… I almost lost my arm. If it wasn't for you…"

"We showed them, didn't we?"

"I thought I would die there, for a moment…"

Mordret looked at them and shook his head.

"Get a grip and act with decorum worthy of the warriors of Valor. Especially you, Varo! Lady Morgan and Saint Madoc are with us. Of course, we won…"

He returned to the temporary camp with the rest of the Valor Awakened, washed the grime of the battle off himself, and attended to his duties.

There was a lot to be done.

At some point, Mordret found himself ascending the carapace of the

tortoise Echo to deliver an important message to his commanders.

A beautiful young woman with black hair and vermilion eyes appeared to guide him through the wards. He stood a little straighter at the sight of her.

It was Morgan, of course. His sister.

His uncle was also there, as domineering and dangerous as he remembered.

"Is there news, Squire Warren?"

Mordret pretended to be starstruck by the fact that Morgan knew his name as he imagined slowly dismembering and killing her.

That was a nice thought.

He bowed, and then said with deep respect in his voice:

"We received word from Knight Shtad, my lady. His cohort had survived the second night and secured a fortified position. Their report indicates that the divination seems to have been correct."

His sister sighed and asked:

"Finally, some good news… what about the rest of the scouts?"

Mordret pretended to be grief-stricken by the deaths of fellow warriors of Valor as he hoped that their deaths were slow, gruesome, and excruciating.

"Lost or forced to enter the Seeds, my lady. However, now that we have secured several entry points… the next cohorts we send will survive, honoring their sacrifice."

His uncle finally spoke:

"The most important thing right now is to reinforce Shtad. His mission might very well decide the outcome of this phase of the conflict. Warren… tell your men to prepare. Once we return to the siege capital, I will personally transport you to the desert. You must

succeed at any cost. If my niece does not object, of course."

Mordret held back the urge to smile.

His sister smiled.

…Why did she look so much like him? It was a little unnerving.

"Why would I? Squire Warren has a sharp blade, and his comrades are the same. They will bring clan Valor glory."

'Oh… well said...'

Holding back a bright smile, Mordret put an expression of zealous devotion on his stolen face and a pinch of exhilaration into his stolen voice:

"You honor me, Lady Morgan! Sir Madoc... we won't let you down!"

Beaming with pride, he struggled against the desire to rip them apart and turned around.

'Ah. Sister, Uncle… let's meet again soon.'

***

A few days passed. Mordret continued to play the role of Squire Warren faithfully. He had communicated with Seishan through the mirrors, but other than that, his time was spent pretending to be a loyal warrior of Valor both in Antarctica and Bastion… that was another hardship of taking an Awakened body. He was not free from being pulled into the Dream Realm every time he slept.

Mordret could sever the tether that connected Warren to the great Citadel, but doing so would reveal his true identity, of course. Well… spending time in his family castle was interesting, too. Even if being within his father's Domain was dangerous. He was forced to be exceedingly careful.

The other disadvantage of wearing an Awakened body was that it made him vulnerable. Not only was Mordret's own power as a Master restrained, but the meager powers Warren possessed were not nearly

enough to protect him.

Wearing the body of a Master, or even a Saint, would have been much safer. However, that was exactly what his family was expecting, so settling for a powerless Awakened was a form of camouflage in and of itself.

Mordret would have even worn a mundane person, but such a vessel was not in line with his goals.

'Really, having any kind of body is enough.'

He reluctantly remembered the long years he had spent as a disembodied reflection while walking to a particular APC.

This time, Mordret was playing the role of a messenger.

He knocked politely on the hatch of the vehicle and cleared his throat, then said solemnly:

"Lady Song of the Fallen, Ascended Sunless. Lady Morgan is inviting you to join her in the head vehicle at your convenience."

A couple of familiar faces emerged from the APC.

Sunless had changed a bit. His sullen disposition seemed to have turned more reserved, but at the same time much darker. Mordret had to hold himself back from smiling.

That guy… even though Mordret had tried to kill him on several occasions, the devious little waif somehow managed to survive. Sunless had even ruined his painstakingly prepared and arduously realized plans in the Nightmare.

Nevertheless, Mordret was strangely fond of the prickly Shadow. Sunless was such an interesting fellow… and a Divine Aspect holder, no less.

Although Mordret really wanted to rip the young man apart because of what had happened in the Ivory City, he also felt reluctant to.

Sunless was a bystander in the crimes of the Domains, after all.

The second person, though…

Mordret's eyes grew slightly cold when he saw the beautiful oracle.

'That one…'

Song of the Fallen stood on the side of Valor, but more than that, she was… problematic.

If Mordret had known what a nuisance she would become when first sensing her presence in the Night Temple, he would have made more of an effort to eliminate the oracle a few months later, when she returned to the Citadel with Sunless.

But now, he had to be wary of her potent divination powers. The painful ritual he had performed in Nether's tower was supposed to shield him from Cassia's gaze, among other things, but one never knew what a wielder of a Sacred Aspect was capable of.

Sunless threw a dark look at Mordret and shook his head. It seemed that he was still not fond of the servants of the great clans… despite spending time in the company of a Seneschal…

'Good for you, Sunless! Stay that way…'

Mordret put on a neutra expression and kept a respectful silence while he escorted the two to the head vehicle of the column. After the guards let them inside, his task was over.

He did catch a glimpse of Changing Star through the opened hatch, though. The last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan was beautiful, cold, and enigmatic…

Even after observing her through the mirrors, Mordret did not know what to make of her.

He would have believed that she was just what people thought her to be — a picture of a noble Awakened warrior, a valiant hero fully committed to defending the waking world from the terrors of the Nightmare Spell — if not for the fact that the supposed hero was, in fact, a Dreamspawn.

And Dreamspawns were never what they seemed.

Since Changing Star had been adopted by his family, she was going to have to die, as well.

However, Mordret did not hate her.

He was also certain that the old man had plans for the last descendant of Immortal Flame.

So… that could be of use to him in the future, as well…

Chapter-1169: Battlefield of the Gods

Mordret was still getting used to the fact that it never got dark in Antarctica. Because of that, the concept of time here was vague and abstract. The landscape itself was not like anything else he had seen in the waking world, and with countless Nightmare Creatures flooding the continent, it was easy to imagine that they were actually in the Dream Realm.

A whole continent of people, pulled into hell.

'No... it's much too early for that...'

The sky was strange, the land was strange, and the beings populating that land were strange.

And yet, wasn't he the strangest one?

'Isn't it nice, to be with family?'

His uncle's wide back was right in front of him.

Saint Madoc was walking across the desolate plain, not at all concerned by the hordes of Nightmare Creatures moving in the distance. A small force of Awakened followed, with Mordret in the lead. They had left their vehicles behind to traverse the last stretch of wilderness on foot, knowing that remaining unseen was more important that remaining safe.

The warriors of Valor were subdued, but full of unshaken resolve. Even surrounded by unspeakable danger, none of them showed the smallest sign of fear. They were ready to face any kind of threat, no matter how dire, and fight any kind of enemy.

Be it abominations or humans.

Mordret, meanwhile, was simply staring at his uncle's back.

How easy would it be to put a sword right through it?

He suppressed a sigh.

Sadly, not easy at all. Not even because of the priceless enchanted armor Whispering Blade was clad in, but simply because Whispering Blade was Whispering Blade.

If any of Mordret's family members were easy to kill, he would not be stuck wearing the cumbersome vessel of Squire Warren for so long.

'There'll come a day...'

They walked forward in silence.

Eventually, the goal of their journey revealed itself. Hidden in the shadow of an abandoned fortress, a Nightmare Gate tore reality apart like a dark scar. The whispers of the Call grew louder and louder as they approached it, and the bones of slain abominations rustled under their feet.

By now, the force brought to Antarctica by his family had explored a lot of Nightmare Gates. They had started with those situated within the siege capitals under the clan's control, and then slowly expanded their search.

This one, however, was rather special. It was the Gate that Knight Shtad had ventured into, and the area of the Dream Realm connected to it hid within itself a precious treasure.

The problem was that this Gate was situated in an extremely dangerous part of Antarctica… it had been dangerous before because of its proximity to Song's territory, and it grew only more dire now because the hunting grounds of the Corrupted Titan that still wandered the continent were slowly shifting in its direction.

That was the reason why the fortified outpost had been abandoned, and why Saint Madoc was personally escorting them to the

destination.

Squire Warren and his people — three cohorts of distinguished Awakened warriors — were meant to be the first wave of reinforcements sent to help the Knight secure his prize. Due to the importance of that mission, Whispering Blade was going to transport them across the threshold between the two worlds.

Of course, Mordret had long taken the place of Squire Warren, so…

His uncle studied the eerie rift of the Gate in silence, seemingly unaffected by the maddening pull of the Call, and then turned around.

"Are you ready, Squire?"

The first one to follow the Saint into the Dream Realm would be in the greatest danger. Mordret pretended to be stalwart and resolute as he nodded.

"Always, my lord."

The words tasted revolting on his tongue.

Madoc nodded with approval and offered him his hand.

The world grew bleak.

Then, it disappeared.

For a moment, Mordret found himself in a vast, lightless space between dream and reality.

And then, blinding light flooded his vision.

Unbearable heat assaulted his skin.

The smell of scorching sand flooded his nose.

Slowly, Mordret regained his vision. He felt deeply uncomfortable, because there were very few reflective surfaces in the surrounding area — limited to only his own sight, he felt nearly blind.

Around him was a vast desert.

A blinding disc of an incandescent sun was bathing the tall dunes in a flood of immolating heat. The sands of the desert were flawlessly white, and the azure sky above him was deep and boundless like an ancient ocean, with not a single cloud blemishing its silken expanse.

Somewhere in the distance, inky-black ruins rose from beneath the sand, scattered across the desert like the bones of a half-buried giant.

Hungry horrors hid in the stark shadows of protruding structures.

Mordret frowned, then shifted slightly, hearing sand rustle behind him.

A grotesque creature that seemed to be made of countless claws was already lunging at him… a split second later, however, it was suddenly dismantled, falling apart in the air. It was as if a maelstrom of invisible blades had sliced it apart.

Black blood boiled as it touched the white sand.

Saint Madoc calmly looked at the remains of the Nightmare Creature and turned to Mordret.

"Stay on guard."

Soon, he disappeared.

Mordret was left alone.

With a sigh, he summoned a special Memory to prevent himself from being cooked alive inside the armor and waited with a sword in his hand.

By the time Saint Madoc returned, bringing two more Awakened with him, there was another dead creature laying on the sand.

It took almost an hour to transport all of them to the Dream Realm. Nevertheless, being guided by a Saint was a great boon — they did not have to search for each other in the deadly desert, facing its dangers alone.

Who knew how many would have survived if not for Saint Madoc?

Finally, the last warrior of Valor appeared under the ruthless sun of the desert. Whispering Blade turned to Warren and sighed.

"This is where I leave you, Squire. You will have to rendezvous with Knight Shtad on your own."

Mordret pretended to be hesitant.

"Saint Madoc, my lord… wouldn't it be more prudent for you to join us?"

His uncle shook his head.

"I am too easily tracked in this cursed land. Coming with you would only increase the chances of the Queen of Worms learning about Shtad's mission. Don't worry… if you perform your duty well, I'll join you soon. By then, it would be too late for Song to intervene."

Mordret bowed, deciding that he was in a great mood.

A few minutes later, Saint Madoc was gone. The Awakened were left alone in the unholy desert.

He looked at his companions and gave them a reassuring smile.

"Hold fast, men! We need to proceed to the first marker without delay. If we fail to reach it before nightfall… may gods have mercy on our souls…"

Of course, the gods were long dead — some might have died on this exact battlefield, in fact — so there was no mercy to be found in either of the two worlds.

Chapter-1170: Day and Night

During the day, the desert was like hell. The small, ruthless sun bathed the pristine white world in suffocating heat, making the Awakened feel as if their bodies and minds were slowly being dissolved into the blinding white radiance.

Mundane humans would not have lasted even a single day in this scorching inferno, but even the experienced Awakened warriors were struggling to persevere. If not for the fact that they had come prepared… the soldiers of Valor shivered despite the unbearable heat when imagining how agonizing such a journey would have been.

The government soldiers pulled into this hell by the Call never stood a chance. After all, the probability of them possessing Memories to mitigate the heat and create unlimited reserves of water was slim, not to mention other dangers.

Most importantly, they would not have had a map.

The rough map created by the scouts of the great clan was, without a doubt, the most vital distinction between Warren's squad and those poor fools.

Because, while the desert was like hell during the day, it was infinitely more harrowing during the night. The heat retreated, replaced by murderous cold… and the dead soldiers of the ancient armies that had once clashed in this land rose from the sand to continue their eternal battle.

This had been one of the last battlefields in the world-ending war between the Demons and the Gods — considering who had fought and fallen here, even the cursed remains of the ancient soldiers were too dreadful for mere mortals to face.

If there was one mercy in the white desert, it was that these accursed

remnants were too powerful to enter the waking world through the lesser Nightmare Gates.

…Of course, there were countless other Nightmare Creatures populating the white dunes, as well. These abominations were not restricted to only moving at night, and even though they preferred to stick to the shadows, Mordret and his companions had to fight more than a few horrors as they traveled across the desert.

The heat, the blinding light, the constant danger of being attacked by swarms of frenzied Nightmare Creatures…

'Irritating.'

Mordret pierced the body of a swift abomination with his sword, then bashed it with his shield, throwing the creature back and off his blade. Sweat was rolling down his face, and his helmet felt as hot as an oven. Even the charm he was using to keep himself cool seemed to be struggling, despite the fact that it was hungrily devouring more and more essence.

By his side, someone swayed and fell to their knees.

Mordret moved, shielding the Awakened warrior from a lunging Nightmare Creature. With its momentum broken, others attacked from the sides, bringing the beast down.

He reached down and helped the Awakened stand up.

"Argh… curses. I'm sorry, Warren. The heat got to me."

Mordret shook his head.

"At ease, Crass. Breathe. Drink some water. This was the last of them."

The other warriors had already finished off the remains of the swarm. All of them seemed tired, their eyes grim.

"Warren, can we rest?"

Varo's usually carefree voice sounded strained and muddled.

Mordret smiled behind the visor of his helmet.

"There's no time. We'll all be dead if we don't reach the destination before sunfall. Ah, don't look so discouraged, Agathe… today is the last day! We are almost there."

Indeed, they had almost reached the rendezvous point with the forces of Knight Shtad. They traveled from one shelter to another following the map that the Ascended had created, hiding in them during the night and enduring the merciless desert during the day.

But now, they were drawing close to the end of this journey.

Mordret shook the blood off his sword and hung his shield on his back using a leather strap.

"Come on, men! We have already been held back by these vermin long enough. Quicken your steps!"

The veteran elites followed him without hesitation.

The sun was already falling behind the horizon when they approached one of the ruins that protruded from beneath the sand like a black obelisk. The ancient structure was broken and tilted to one side, its purpose and original shape long erased by the passage of time. It was casting a long shadow, which hid within itself a refreshing coolness.

A lone light ignited in the depths of the shadow and blinked a few times, relaying a coded message. Mordret summoned a luminous Memory and covered it with his palm, answering.

After that, they proceed toward the ruin.

A tall figure was standing near the collapsed wall, clad in heavy armor of black steel. Even surrounded by the scorching heat of the hellish desert, the man seemed intrepid and composed. His weathered face was calm and cold.

Knight Shtad was as fearsome as his reputation.

There was a heavy halberd resting on his shoulder, and a pile of

horribly disfigured abomination corpses strewn across the blood-soaked sand around him.

Mordret bowed, pretending to be tired.

"Sir Shtad. It is good to see you."

The Knight of Valor studied them for a few moments, and then nodded.

"It is good to see you too, Warren. Come. The night is approaching."

He led them deeper into the ruin, where a fissure in the obsidian stones opened a path to the interior of the ancient structure.

Soon, Mordret found himself in a subterranean chamber that was half-filled with white sand. There, a group of Awakened were resting, looking rugged and battered, but also much too relaxed for the dire nature of their surroundings.

The scouts.

They met Warren's group with grins and welcoming gestures.

"Finally! We were going crazy waiting for reinforcements."

"Come eat, guys. You must be tired."

"It's Warren and his people. Good. The creature won't stand a chance…"

Once everyone settled, food and fresh water were distributed. Everyone was tired and hungry, so they spent some time in silence catching their breaths, recovering from being in the heat, and eating.

As they did, a chilling clamor slowly rose above them, soon turning into an dreadful cacophony. The old bones were once again crawling from the sand to resume their eternal battle.

At some point, Mordret put away his flask and looked at Knight Shtad with a masterful pretense of respect and veneration.

"Sir Shtad… we are at your service. What is your intention?"

The intrepid Knight lingered for a few moments. Then, a calm smile appeared on his face.

"My intention is simple, Warren. Tomorrow, we will slay the Guardian… and take the Citadel."

Chapter-1171: His Own Designs

Indeed, the treasure Knight Shtad had discovered in the desert was a Citadel.

Not the Tomb of Ariel itself, of course — no scout had managed to get anywhere near the black pyramid, yet. It just always loomed far in the distance, never getting closer, like an ominous mirage.

But he did find a Citadel.

At this point, both Valor and Song were scouting the outer reaches of the desert in search of a suitable position to establish a base camp. Once they found one, numerous soldiers would be brought there through the corresponding Nightmare Gates, and the expeditions toward the pyramid would be launched.

However, a Citadel had the potential to drastically change the balance of power between the two great clans in their pursuit of the Demon's tomb.

The clan that possessed one would hold an overwhelming advantage. The clan that did not would fall behind before the race even started.

A Citadel was not only better fortified and safer than a makeshift stronghold. Connected to the waking world by a Gateway, it would make it much easier to ferry Awakened into the Dream Realm, transport supplies, and establish logistical chains.

Some regions of the Dream Realm held only one Citadel, while some held many. At this point, it was unknown if Knight Shtad's discovery was the only Citadel in the white desert, except for the Tomb of Ariel itself, but even if Song were to eventually discover a second one, the delay would put them at a great disadvantage.

So, needless to say, taking the Citadel was of paramount importance.

However… it was guarded by a fearsome Nightmare Creature.

More than that, even though Valor put a lot of effort into keeping Shtad's prize a secret, there was no guarantee that Song would not try to take it by force eventually.

So, Warren and his people were dispatched into the desert as the first wave of reinforcements. Their task was to assist the fearsome Knight in conquering the Citadel and lay the groundwork for the arrival of further forces.

Of course, there was a problem with that plan.

The fact that an insidious creature had long taken the place of Squire Warren, and came to the desert in his place.

"Valor!"

Mordret let out a fierce battle cry as he led his people into the tide of Nightmare Creatures.

The Citadel was right in front of them.

It was not a fortress, nor was it a pyramid built of black stone. In fact, it was not a man-made structure at all.

Instead, it was a gargantuan black skull that towered above the white dunes, staring at the azure sky with the dark pits of its empty eye sockets.

There were three of them — two where a human's eyes would be, and the third one above them, right in the middle of the skull's vast forehead.

Each of the empty eye sockets was the side of a stadium, and currently, a flood of revolting Nightmare Creatures was flowing out of them onto the white sand.

"Hold fast!"

Roaring such stupid things, Mordret plunged into the mass of abominations. His sword rose and fell, cutting them down, and his

shield rang under a barrage of attacks.

'How… tedious.'

He felt slightly frustrated by the need to hold himself back. Mordret could not unleash his power as a Master, but even more disheartening than that, he had to imitate the combat skills of the long-dead Warren.

As a retainer of the great clan Valor, Warren had been at the pinnacle of what Awakened warriors strived to be. And yet, to Mordret, that level of skill was dull and suffocating.

Limiting himself to such a mediocre level of mastery was harder than surviving in the tide of Nightmare Creatures.

He endured the frustrating limitations and fought, struggling to keep his body intact. Sadly, Warren had been a heroic type, as well, so to play his role faithfully, Mordret had to act accordingly.

He did not hesitate to put himself in danger's way to protect his soldiers, risking life and limb to make sure that all of his companions survived.

"Stay strong, Varo! Agathe, back! Lean on me, Crass!"

His companions seemed empowered with him by their side.

It was strange.

Mordret was leading soldiers of Valor into battle, all of them connected by a shared sense of duty, belonging, and devotion. They spilled the blood of Nightmare Creatures and fought with valiant resolve, refusing to give ground.

Wasn't that what he was supposed to become, if things had been different? Wasn't leading the brave warriors of Valor the fate that had been stolen from him?

'Ah. Such irony.'

After an eternity of blood and agonizing heat… the battle was over.

The Nightmare Creatures were dead. The Tyrant that had made the Citadel its lair had been slain by Knight Shtad himself. The Awakened — both those brought to the desert by Mordret and those that belonged to Shtad's personal elite unit — were mostly alive, and victorious.

They had won.

Now, all they had to do was reap the spoils of their triumph.

The crowd of mighty Awakened warriors cleaned their blades and dove into the cool darkness of the ancient skull. They carefully made their way to the heart of the Citadel, where, in a vast chamber of black bone, the Gateway awaited to be activated.

Knight Shtad was the first to see it. Bright sunlight spilled through a jagged crack in the chamber's roof, and, thrust into the bone floor, a gargantuan arrowhead of lustrous steel shone with reflected radiance.

A triumphant smile appeared on the Knight's face.

Turning around, he placed his heavy hand on Mordret's shoulder.

"You did well, Warren. Glory and valor!"

Mordret smiled pleasantly.

Everything was going according to plan. Now, his task was simple — remain in the good graces of Sir Shtad, anchor himself to the Gateway, return to the waking world, and inform Clan Song about the location of the Citadel.

Then, when Valor properly established themselves here and concentrated their forces in one place, he would help Seishan and the rest stage an unexpected attack and rip the Citadel from his clan's hands while decimating its defenders.

…However, that was Clan Song's plan.

Mordret, on the other hand, had his own designs.

In his opinion, the emissaries of the Queen of Worms had allowed

themselves to commit a grave sin. They had grown arrogant.

Drunk on the succession of easy victories and their outward superiority in terms of numbers, they had foolishly come to underestimate his family.

Wasn't it the epitome of being misguided? To look down on the descendants of War while waging one...

Seishan and Beastmaster might have been blinded by the feeling of complacency his sister had so masterfully lured them into, but Mordret knew better. It didn't matter who had reaped a few victories at the start… all that mattered was who would be left standing at the finish.

Clan Song seemed to be holding an advantage for now, but the walls of the trap were already closing in around them. Mordret did not know what the trap was, but he did know one thing — the more time Morgan was given, the more devastating her retaliation would be.

So, to destroy her plans, he had to throw the cadence of this conflict into utter chaos.

…Looking at Knight Shtad with a pleasant smile, Mordret nodded.

"Glory and valor!"

With that, he plunged his sword into the Ascended warrior's neck.

Shtad's eyes widened, and, as blood poured out of his mouth, Mordret moved his blade sideways, almost decapitating the Ascended. Just like that, the fearsome Knight of Valor died, killed by the treacherous attack of an ally.

All around him, the Awakened froze, paralyzed by shock.

Crass shivered.

"Wha… Warren, what…"

Ripping his sword out of Shtad's neck, Mordret delivered a downward cut in one swift, fluid motion. The blade fell on Crass's head, splitting

his skull and obliterating his face. The Awakened was dead long before the Ascended's body fell to the floor.

The rest of them were utterly stunned.

However, they weren't the elites of a great clan for nothing.

Despite the harrowing wrongness of what had happened, his companions, who were the closest ones to the bloody scene, reacted just a split second later.

Both Varo and Agathe moved, raising their swords to attack their friend and commander, who had seemingly gone mad.

Mordret tried to parry both strikes, but failed.

Varo's sword pierced his throat.

Pushing Warren down, the petrified Awakened stared at his dead eyes and screamed.

"How can... Beastmaster, that witch! She must have forced him!"

Behind him, Agathe remained silent for a moment, looking down. Her body trembled slightly.

Varo turned around, staring at his comrade with crazed eyes. Agathe raised her head and glanced at him with a pleasant smile.

"Really, now… must you compare me to that terrible woman?"

Her rapier shot forward.

Soon, the gargantuan black skull was filled with screams, terror, and the stench of human blood.

The Nightmare Creatures were dead.

The Awakened were dead, too.

Only Mordret remained.

Chapter-1172: Fine Facade

Sunny stared at the silhouette of a departing battleship, deep in thought.

October was now behind them, and November was in full bloom. Well… not that many things ever bloomed in Antarctica. It was still summer here, the day never ended, and although the weather was chilly, it could not even be called cold.

The evacuation continued at a steady pace. Hundreds of millions of refugees had already been carried across the ocean, and millions more were leaving every week.

The situation on the continent… was dire, but also strangely manageable.

The Chain of Nightmare was escalating without end. There were more Nightmare Gates, more abominations, more threats and problems that had to be solved… but, at the same time, the forces of humanity were also growing stronger.

Despite the losses they suffered and the increasing strain on logistics and supplies, they were becoming more steadfast and efficient in dealing with the endless tide of Nightmare Creatures.

Well, it was not that surprising, really.

The greatest strength of humans was their adaptability. They were masters of absorbing and utilizing information. They learned.

At the start of the Antarctica Campaign, the Evacuation Army had been thrust into a new and seemingly impossible situation. Faced with an unprecedented cataclysm, they suffered bitter defeats… and yet, they endured. Then, slowly, they learned how to deal with the enemy better.

Their tactics and strategy improved. Their well of knowledge about the types of abominations coming through the Gates grew deeper. The inexperienced soldiers became grizzled veterans.

It helped that there were countless soul shards to be harvested, as well. Although Sunny was somewhat sad that the price of the shards on the global marker was going to plummet, cutting off one of the major revenue streams for the Brilliant Emporium, he was also glad.

By now, most Awakened soldiers of the Evacuation Army had ample chances to saturate their soul cores, thus vastly elevating their power. Something like that had probably never happened in history, at least not on that scale.

There were plenty of Memories and Echoes to go around, too.

There were also more and more Sleepers who had survived their First Nightmares. There were so many, in fact, that the approaching winter solstice would most likely become a breaking point in the entire campaign.

In a matter of weeks after that fateful day, the number of Awakened in the Evacuation Army was going to tremendously swell, perhaps even double.

In the meantime, though…

In one of the three defensive sections of East Antarctica, government forces were stubbornly holding against the endless assaults of Nightmare Creatures under the leadership of Wake of Ruin.

Effie and Kai were doing great for themselves. The Wolves and the Nightsingers, as well as their commanders, were known as the hammer and anvil of the Evacuation Army by now. Their fame and reputation were growing with each passing day… even though each victory was made a little bitter by the casualties that the two companies suffered.

In the second defensive section, Clan Song was quietly creating one miracle after another. Strangely enough, it was Seishan's name that was mentioned most often — the three Saints might have had

overwhelming battle power, but Seishan seemed to be the one actually managing the war effort.

Jet periodically updated Sunny on what was happening in Song's territory, so while he did not know all the details, he at least knew that the situation there was mostly under control.

And then there was the third defensive section, the one where the great clan Valor — and Sunny himself — were located.

Things were manageable here, too.

Morgan and Nephis had become like two goddesses for the refugees crammed into the siege capitals. Their fame had outshone even that of the Saints… two beautiful sisters, one wisely leading the soldiers from the back, the other never leaving the frontlines. It was a compelling image.

While forces of Valor were strong enough to resist most attacks, it was Changing Star and her Fire Keepers that were always sent into the most dire and important battles. For now, they had not failed to secure a victory once.

Their numbers had diminished a lot since their arrival to the Southern Quadrant, but not because of casualties — instead, several cohorts of the Fire Keepers had already ventured into the Seeds, aiming to become Ascended.

Unknown to most people, there was also a third pillar to the success of the Valor contingent… Cassie. While no one except for a select few knew of the importance of her role, the quiet oracle was indispensable in building the strategy of the defending forces.

Her ability to gather and swiftly analyze information from a multitude of scattered sources, keen mind, and supernatural intuition were tools that allowed Morgan to drastically increase the efficiency and effectiveness of her command.

Meanwhile, the House of Night was doing its part, as well. From rare messages sent by Naeve, Sunny knew that the naval convoys traversing the oceans had faced many difficulties. There had been

several tragedies, but overall, more and more refugees were reaching safety in the other three Quadrants.

So… the situation was dire, but things seemed to be going fine in Antarctica.

Of course, Sunny knew that it was only a facade.

Behind that facade, the bloody feud between Valor and Song was growing more and more violent, threatening to spill into utter disaster.

The forward scouts of both great clans were hunting each other in the Dream Realm. Out here in the waking world, there were more and more ambushes and attempts at sabotage. Powerful Awakened warriors were killed by other humans, instead of Nightmare Creatures. Most of it happened far away from the siege capitals, for now…

And yet, Sunny had been pretty busy in the past few weeks.

It was hard to do the things he wanted to do while remaining unnoticed, but he managed with the help of Shadow Step and Shadow Manifestation, somehow.

He could traverse great distances swiftly at night while riding Nightmare. As such, his hunting grounds were not limited to a single siege capital… in fact, Sunny had made an effort to limit his activity to a minimum there, as well as in any area where he showed his face by following Morgan.

He ambushed the ambushers. He assassinated the assassins. He killed members of both Valor and Song without distinction, leading both forces to believe that it was the enemy who had possessed hidden forces in the region.

Sunny had struck several more times after the massacre at the underground factory… he had thought that it would make him feel good, but it didn't.

The things he did were not pleasurable. There was a rush and a satisfaction of a clean kill, but at the same time, there was disgust

and an overwhelming sense of what a waste this whole mad disaster was. It was just something that had to be done.

And even then, as time passed, Sunny was starting to lose sight of why he was even doing these things.

Was it all futile?

It sure seemed that way...

And so, every time he happened to be near a port fortress, Sunny liked to watch the ships depart.

This, at least, was something obvious. A palpable result. With each vessel that sailed away, more refugees were taken away from this hell.

He climbed the walls of the fortress to watch the ships leave today, too.

This time, however… something felt different.

It was as though a sudden tension permeated the air.

Sunny sighed.

He felt as if things were about to change.

Chapter-1173: Red Herring

Sunny was watching the battleship move across the tumultuous surface of the ocean.

But, of course, he was watching other things at the same time as well.

His shadows were spread throughout the port fortress, absorbing all kinds of information.

One was hidden in the barrel of an overheated rail gun, watching Nightmare Creatures layi siege to the walls of the stronghold. A deathly downpour of projectiles, both mundane and magical, was falling on the surging mass of attacking abominations. Figures of Knights could be seen within the horde, moving to eliminate the most dangerous targets.

Saint Gilead was also there, clad in a suit of lustrous armor, facing the Nightmare Creatures like a bastion of immovable courage and steel.

It was a familiar scene.

Another shadow was with the refugees who were nervously waiting for their turn to board the ships. The sounds of the battle were too oppressive to talk freely, but they couldn't help but whisper, sharing their fears and hopes. Sunny listened carefully, assessing the changes in the mood of the civilians, as well as how they perceived the conflict.

From time to time, he managed to learn something interesting from the rumors spreading among the refugees.

A third shadow was with Nephis, who had entered the field hospital beneath the fortress wall some time ago. She was kneeling in front of a bloodied stretcher, holding her hands above the terrible wounds

covering the body of a mundane soldier. A soft radiance emanated from beneath her skin, and the wounds of the young man were swiftly closing. Her face was motionless and pale.

There were many people behind her who had been in the throes of suffering not too long ago, but were now healthy and whole. They were looking at her with eyes in which indescribable relief mixed with awe and reverence in equal measure.

The fourth shadow was with Sunny himself.

…And, of course, the fifth shadow was slowly making its way into the sealed chamber where Morgan had gone a dozen or so minutes ago. Usually, Sunny would not risk getting that close to the Princess of War when she really wanted to keep her conversations private...

But today was a special day.

It was not because the main force of Clan Valor had left their designated siege capitals and assembled in this pot fortress to give battle to a large horde of migrating Nightmare Creatures — things like that happened from time to time, when it was more advantageous to deal with the threat sooner rather than later.

No… it was because today, Saint Madoc had returned from his clandestine mission in the territory of Clan Song.

To this day, Sunny was not sure whether Ascended Bast was truly the current vessel of Mordret, one of his reflections, or simply a diversion meant to sow confusion among his enemies. At times, Sunny had felt certain that the bleak man was none other than the Prince of Nothing, but he still harbored some doubt.

Whispering Blade was going to dispel his doubts once and for all.

The shadow did not manage to enter the sealed room — doing so would have alerted Morgan about its presence — but it did manage to slither into a service duct running above it, and peek inside through the small gap in the ceiling insulation.

Sunny frowned as he watched the ocean, noticing a disaffectionate expression on Saint Madoc's face.

The fearsome Transcendent was talking, his voice even:

"...waiting for me. It was a trap from the very beginning. Which would not have been too inconvenient if Ascended Bast was, indeed, the abomination. However, he was not. I confirmed it."

Morgan leaned back and sighed.

"Still. It couldn't be helped. We had to eliminate the possibility."

She lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"How serious was the trap?"

A faint smile appeared on Saint Madoc's face. Throwing a quick glance at the young woman, he chuckled.

"You don't have to worry about this old man, Morgan. Silent Stalker and Dire Fang were there… I could not leave without saying a proper goodbye, though, so they'll have a few new scars to brag about."

Many kilometers away, Sunny tilted his head a little.

'Such arrogance…'

However, was it really arrogance if Madoc was powerful enough to back up his words, and lethal enough to make each of them count?

Regardless of that, one question remained. If Ascended Bast had nothing to do with Mordret, then where the hell was that bastard, really?

In the sealed room, Morgan echoed his thoughts:

"The situation is… problematic, then. None of the divinations managed to pinpoint his location. Either Queen Ki was generous enough to bestow that person with a truly powerful obscuring Memory, or he has some means of avoiding our gaze of his own. It is strange, though. How could a mere Master achieve such a thing?"

Madoc frowned.

"We weren't able to confirm his Ascended Ability. Maybe it has something to do with that… you can't forget what Rank his Aspect is, Morgan."

Not paying attention to a dark expression on his niece's face, Whispering Blade added:

"He might be closer than we think, too. These strange attacks we suffered recently — weren't our diviners strangely unable to ascertain anything about them? It can't be a coincidence."

Morgan remained silent for a while, then shook her head.

"There is some correlation, but the pattern doesn't fit. More than that, the countermeasures we have in place to confirm the identities of our Ascended showed no anomalies. We can't check every refugee, mundane soldier, and Awakened, of course…"

Madoc thought for a few moments.

"What about that government brute, Ascended Sunless?"

A slight smile appeared on Morgan's face.

"Who do you take me for? He was the first one I checked. We have studied him thoroughly after the Night Temple incident, as well. Ascended Sunless is certainly not ordinary — his SS designation, service record, and age should attest to that — but he is definitely himself, and not that abomination's vessel."

Sunny frowned. Valor seemed to possess some kind of tool capable of determining whether one was possessed by Mordret or not, even if its function seemed to be limited to a small number of people. Nevertheless, he had been one of the people they checked… when the hell had that happened? He had not even noticed anything.

Back in the sealed room, Morgan frowned.

"...So where is the creature hiding?"

At that moment, the door suddenly opened, and someone walked inside. Both Morgan and Madoc looked at the newcomer with

surprise.

"Cassia? How… bold of you, to come here without invitation."

The Princess of War smiled dangerously. At the same time, Madoc raised an eyebrow.

"You'd better have a good explanation for this interruption, young lady."

Cassie lingered for a few moments, appearing somewhat nervous.

Then, she said in a tense voice:

"There is a message for you. I think you should come outside…"

Chapter-1174: Lacquered Box

'Now this… is interesting.'

Sunny was stealthily making his way to the isolated inner courtyard of the port fortress. His shadows were on the move, too…

The one who had been observing the battle against the horde of Nightmare Creatures was flying across the battered surface of the wall, not paying any attention to the flashes of firing armaments. The one who had been hiding among the refugees had left them behind, approaching the courtyard from the other direction.

The one that had been spying on Morgan hid itself within Cassie's shadow, and the one that had been following Nephis remained within hers.

Currently, all of them were converging on a single point.

In the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by a wide ring of empty space, a long figure stood as numerous soldiers and Awakened aimed their weapons at it.

Intricate armor of black steel, a beautiful face framed by curls of raven-black hair… and vivid, vibrant vermilion eyes.

It was… Morgan.

'Don't tell me…'

As the real Morgan emerged from the gates of the stronghold in the company of Madoc and Cassie, the soldiers that were aiming at the invader looked at her with wide eyes.

They must have realized that the creature standing in front of them was not the real Princess of War… and yet, seeing the two identical

young women stare at each other was an eerie experience.

The real Morgan gritted her teeth in contempt.

…The reflection perfectly mirrored her expression.

And that was what the lone figure was — a creature created by Mordret from a piece of his soul, similar to how he had created the Mirror Beast.

The real Morgan's hand rested on the hilt of her sword, but the reflection was holding a black lacquered box in its, instead.

Despite the hundreds of rifles and enchanted weapons aimed at the mirror creature, it seemed perfectly calm.

Nephis entered the courtyard and stopped, looking at the bizarre scene with a reserved expression. Sunny had appeared from the shadows, too, keeping out of sight as he observed the situation.

'What is that crazy bastard doing?'

His gaze slid across the faces of everyone gathered in the courtyard — the mundane soldiers and Awakened retainers of Valor, a few Knights, Nephis, Cassie, Madoc…

Was Mordret among them right now, somewhere, enjoying their reactions?

As the reflection tilted its head a little, the real Morgan snarled:

"How dare you wear that face, you vile thing?"

Her face was a mask of revulsion and fury.

This time, the mirror creature failed to reflect her expression. Instead, it smiled pleasantly, then bowed, and gently placed the lacquered box on the ground.

Then, the reflection opened its mouth and spoke, its voice indistinguishable from that of Morgan.

"A... present… for my dear sister."

Then, its smile widened a little.

"Come... soon. I missed… you a lot."

Before Madoc could stop Morgan, she suddenly disappeared from where she had stood. Her speed was too great for the mundane soldiers and the Awakened warriors to trace with their naked eyes, but Sunny saw it — a black and red blur that cut across the courtyard, approaching the reflection with the speed of a bullet.

He knew better than most how terribly dangerous these creatures were, so Sunny expected to see a tremendously destructive fight. He even prepared to retreat… but, to his surprise, the dire battle never happened.

It was not because Morgan revealed one of her hidden trump cards, and neither was it because Madoc intervened. Instead, it was simply because the reflection did not even try to defend itself.

It just stood there, smiling pleasantly, as Morgan's sword pierced the breastplate of the black armor and exited from the creature's back.

Slowly, a net of thin cracks appeared on the skin of the reflection. Morgan's eyes widened slightly as she watched the perfect copy of her face slowly crumble into a rain of glass shards, which then disappeared without a trace in a flash of silver light.

Just like that, one of Mordret's Reflections was destroyed.

Nevertheless, Sunny's frown only deepened.

"So, he wanted to deliver a message. What message could it be?"

Without a doubt, the ability of the Reflection to appear in the very heart of one of Valor's strongholds without anyone noticing was a message in and of itself. It was as if Mordret was mocking his family, pointing out that no amount of guards and protections could save them from his wrath.

Forcing Morgan to watch herself be destroyed was a message, too.

Mordret was hinting that this was her inevitable future.

…And of course, the actual message was the black lacquered box and the words the reflection had spoken.

'A present for my dear sister. Come soon, I missed you a lot.'

All of it was one immaculate provocation.

However…

Just what was inside the box?

As Sunny watched, Morgan sheathed her sword with a dark expression and looked down. Madoc slowly approached, looking at the box with wariness. Cassie and Nephis got closer, too.

"Could there be something dangerous inside?"

Cassie's voice sounded tense.

Morgan glanced at her silently, and then leaned forward to pick up the box. It was as if she was trying to show that there was nothing that Mordret could do that she would be afraid of.

Without hesitating, she opened the box and looked inside.

Morgan's impression subtly changed.

The insides of the box were upholstered in red silk, and on that silk rested a human skull.

The skull was covered in soot to appear black, and there was a rough hole made in its forehead, as if to resemble a third eye.

There was a long moment of silence, and then, Whispering Blade suddenly thrust his hands into the box and picked up the morbid gift that Mordret had left behind. His face was strangely grim.

As Madoc studied the skull, Morgan looked at him with a silent question.

"What is it?"

The Saint gritted his teeth.

Then, he gently placed the skull back on the red silk and said:

"...It's Shtad. It's Shtad's head."

Chapter-1175: Demon of Chaos

Like a demon of chaos, Mordret had appeared out of nowhere and thrown everything into utter disarray.

Antarctica, which had been like a powder keg for a while now, finally exploded into a conflagration of violence because of the macabre gift that he had delivered to his sister in an elegant lacquered box.

Sunny had not realized the full complications of what had transpired in the courtyard of the port fortress until some time later. He knew that Knight Shtad was a highly regarded Ascended of Clan Valor who had been entrusted with an extremely important mission in the Dream Realm. So, he simply assumed that Clan Song managed to pull off another victory in the simmering conflict.

This was important, of course, but not groundbreaking in and of itself.

However, his misconception was corrected by a short message from Jet:

"Our colleagues from Ravenheart are mobilizing their forces. They seem pretty angry."

He stared at the screen of the communicator for a few moments, frowning.

'What?'

Why would Clan Song be preparing to make a big move in a hurry if the death of Knight Shtad was a part of their plan? And why would they be angry?

Unless, of course…

What Mordret had done was not something they expected, or even went directly against their machinations.

Sunny's eyes narrowed slightly.

'Don't tell me…'

Had Beastmaster, perhaps, received something like that black lacquered box, as well?

'What the hell is that madman doing?'

Feeling an ominous premonition, Sunny deactivated the communicator and hastened his steps. He was walking across the inner courtyard where the confrontation between Morgan and the Reflection had happened not too long ago, heading toward the main keep.

His shadows were already inside. They were trying to get closer to Morgan, Madoc, Nephis, and Sir Gilead, who had all gathered for an emergency meeting after the discovery of Shtad's skull.

Taking a considerable risk, he eventually managed to gain access to their conversation and learn a few more things about what Mordret's message really meant.

Sunny's frown deepened.

'Black Skull Citadel?'

So, the scouts sent into the Nightmare Desert by Valor had managed to discover a working Gateway somewhere in its depths. The clan in possession of a Citadel would gain a staggering advantage in the task of reaching the Tomb of Ariel, so Morgan and Madoc had put a lot of effort into keeping that information secret.

They had even kept reinforcements to a minimum to not risk revealing Knight Shtad's location through irregular troop movements.

And yet, Mordret had somehow managed to not only learn of the clandestine mission, but also intercept and slaughter the force tasked with capturing the Citadel. Including the powerful Master in charge

of it.

Which would logically mean that the Black Skull had fallen into Song's hands.

However… it had not.

That much was apparent from the fact that Song was mobilizing their forces in a great hurry. If Sunny knew of it, then Morgan surely knew as well.

So, if neither Valor nor Song controlled the Citadel…

Then who the hell did?

The answer was obvious.

It was Mordret. Mordret alone.

Which might as well have as meant that the Black Skull Citadel was currently empty.

No matter how powerful the Prince of Nothing was, a single Master was like an ant when compared to the might of a great clan. Even with a Divine Aspect and his Reflections, Mordret was incapable of keeping what he had stolen.

Even though he was holding the key to the Nightmare Desert in his hands, he was not strong enough to defend it.

So, by delivering Shtad's skull to Morgan, he had painted a target on his back. The true meaning of his message was…

"Come and get me."

And if Sunny knew anything about Mordret, then the message sent to Song would have been like so:

"Come before they get me."

Basically, from the moment the Prince of Nothing revealed that he had usurped the Black Skull, the two great clans were in a race to

take it from him first.

But why had he done it?

There was a pace and cadence to the conflict between Valor and Song. It was a complicated dance that followed a subtle, but ruthless logic. Awakened, Masters, and even Saints were like game pieces. By moving pieces around the board, advancing and retreating, both sides were delivering small wounds to the enemy and trying to maneuver into an advantageous position.

Currently, the game was nearing the end of its early stage. Both clans were still acting with caution, laying the groundwork for the true assaults that would happen in the future. They were not even done struggling to secure advantages.

Mordret's actions had destroyed that pace, and made a mockery of that cadence.

He had single-handedly put both sides in a position where they were forced to throw away their carefully prepared plans, abandon caution, and move the timetable of the conflict forward, switching from careful maneuvering to an all-out war.

Clan Song was mobilizing their forces… and because they were, Clan Valor would move, as well.

Awakened, Masters, and even Saints — all of them were going to be sent on the battlefield to secure the Black Skull, which was free for the taking… provided that you got to it first.

Sunny did not know which Nightmare Gate led to the area where the Citadel was located, but it would soon become the most dangerous place in all of East Antarctica.

And maybe even the whole world.

'That… that crazy bastard.'

He was honestly a little shaken by the magnitude of the consequences that Mordret's brazen stunt had caused.

The whole landscape of the conflict between Valor and Song had suddenly and drastically changed. That dire change was so fundamental that it was hard to conceive of its true scope, let alone calculate what would happen as a result.

The sudden nature of it all was quietly overwhelming.

Sunny entered the keep of the port fortress and took a few deep breaths.

…While the shift in the nature of the conflict that Mordret had caused was startling, strictly speaking, it was not necessarily a bad thing.

Sure, it could end up being catastrophic, but it could also end up being a blessing in disguise.

There were many factors to consider, but as far as Sunny was concerned, one was the most important.

Where the damned Nightmare Gate was located.

Chapter-1176: Bitter Feeling

The location of the Nightmare Gate that led to the vicinity of the Black Skull was of paramount importance. Currently, no one except for Mordret was anchored to the Gateway of the Citadel, so that Nightmare Gate was still the only feasible way to reach it.

If it was located in the wilderness of East Antarctica, the battle between the two great clans was going to happen far away from the siege capitals and the civilian population.

If it was inside a city, though…

'Think rationally.'

Sunny walked through the corridors of the fortress as he analyzed the situation.

If the Nightmare Gate was located inside a siege capital, then there wasn't much he could do. The lives of countless civilians would be put in mortal danger, or maybe even snuffed out directly. The best Sunny could manage was to try mitigating the damage, somehow.

If it was somewhere in the wilderness, however… then he did not have to do anything.

His problems would just solve themselves. Valor and Song were welcome to slaughter each other as much as they wanted.

'Wrong.'

Thinking that way was shortsighted. Sure, the great clans were a bunch of hateful jerks, but they were also responsible for defending a vast portion of East Antarctica, albeit simply to keep up appearances. Their power was especially important when dealing with high-value targets like titans, since six out of the seven Saints present on the

continent belonged to the Domains.

What would happen if all of them just went and killed each other?

'Nothing good…'

Countless refugees had already been evacuated, but millions more remained. If only the Evacuation Army had been given a few more months — enough for the legion of Sleepers to undergo Awakening — things would have been different.

But Mordret, the damned lunatic, had made that impossible. So, the power of the great clans was still too important.

Sunny felt sick to his stomach. He was deeply unhappy about the fact that, while the great clans were odious, they were also needed. They were like a necessary evil.

Thinking that way made him feel dirty. It felt like he was making compromises.

Was that how Wake of Ruin and the rest of the government felt?

'Forget about it. So what the hell do I do?'

It seemed that, thanks to Mordret, a bloody and destructive all-out battle between the forces of Valor and Song was now both close and inevitable. They could entirely obliterate each other, which would be the worst outcome, since there would be no one left to continue defending the refugees from the myriads of Nightmare Creatures roaming the continent.

Therefore, there was only one way for him to achieve the best outcome.

If there was no way to prevent the battle, he had to do everything in his power to help one side achieve victory… and not any kind of victory, at that. A pyrrhic one would be no different from mutual destruction. Only an overwhelming victory would minimize the losses of one of the sides, thus leaving enough fighters alive to make a difference in the evacuation effort.

'Wait… wait…'

Sunny suddenly froze, growing even more pale than usual.

His eyes widened.

His hands trembled.

…Then, slowly, a smile that seemed more than a little mad appeared on his face.

Through the shadow that was hiding in the sealed strategy room, he looked at someone who stood there, silently listening to what Morgan was saying.

A young woman with silver hair and cold grey eyes, clad in an intricate armor of black steel.

He looked at Nephis.

Sunny slowly exhaled.

'Was that what you meant?'

Was it not exactly what she had told him a lifetime ago, during the opulent ball of the great clan Valor?

That he would follow her not because she had ordered him to, but because he wanted to… with a smile on his face.

That their fates were intertwined.

On that day, Sunny had rejected Nephis and refused to follow her into the embrace of Clan Valor. Instead, he enlisted in the First Evacuation Army and left for Antarctica.

So much had happened since then…

And yet, here he was, planning to fight side by side with her under the banner of the great clan Valor, helping them in their sinful war against the great clan Song.

Entirely of his own accord.

Sunny reached with one hand and touched his neck, as if checking to see if there was a slave collar on it.

'What is this bitter feeling?'

A hollow laugh escaped from his lips.

After a few moments, Sunny shook his head and continued on his way.

'It doesn't matter, anyway.'

Sure, he felt bitterly reluctant to prove Neph right. But wouldn't it be pathetically childish, to throw a tantrum and change his decision just because his pride was hurt?

Since when did he have pride, anyway?

Whether he liked it or not, making sure that as many civilians as possible survived the Chain of Nightmares was indeed what he wished for.

So, if Sunny had to help Clan Valor battle Clan Song to achieve that goal, that was what he would do.

There was the possibility of helping Song defeat Valor instead, too. As far as he was concerned, one was just as vile as the other, so it made no difference to Sunny which side he would end up supporting.

However, he was already integrated into the Valor force to some extent, which was convenient. Nephis, Cassie, and the Fire Keepers were also here, so going to the other side meant potentially causing their deaths.

Directly or indirectly, that was not something Sunny wanted or was willing to do.

Which meant that he was stuck with Valor.

…Of course, it was highly questionable if his involvement would even make a difference. But he had to at least try.

He had to try his best.

Sunny moved through the port fortress, which was slowly becoming filled with noise. There was a strange smile on his face.

'...Ain't it funny?'

He was suddenly sad that the Sin of Solace was not there to appreciate the joke.

Chapter-1177: Drums of War

The drums of war were booming all across Antarctica.

Well, nothing that noticeable was happening, really. The great clans were mobilizing forces with a silent efficiency that was both subtle and frightening. If one did not know what to look for, they would remain blissfully unaware of the fact that the whole continent would be soon shaken by the fallout of a historic battle.

Sunny, however, knew.

In the port fortress, the thunder of the cannonade had grown silent. The horde of Nightmare Creatures had been dealt with, and the tired soldiers were descending from the walls. Instead of going to rest, however, they were quietly listening to new orders and starting to prepare for an immediate departure.

The mundane soldiers were checking their equipment with calm, business-like expressions. The Awakened, who would usually not dismiss their enchanted armor in the field, strangely wore simple uniforms — knowing how dire the near future promised to be, they wanted to give all their Memories a chance to be fully repaired.

The administrative personnel were frantically working to rearrange logistical chains and prepare the force for a sudden expedition.

There were many signs like that.

They were especially apparent when one compared the behavior of the Valor soldiers with that of the Evacuation Army staff. The latter were tiredly celebrating the victory, while the former seemed more focused than when they had been battling the abominations.

'The Nightmare Gate does not seem to be located inside of a siege capital.'

Sunny found a calm and dark corner within the keep of the fortress and leaned on the wall.

He had managed to determine the nature of the area where the entrance to the Black Skull Citadel was located by spying on the Valor administrative staff — any large-scale movement of military forces involved a certain amount of logistical work, and one could infer many things from these preparations.

From the looks of it, Clan Valor was preparing to venture into the wilderness of East Antarctica. The distance they had to traverse also didn't seem to be small, so that put some of Sunny's worries to rest.

Still, there was a lot to consider.

Sunny knew what the great clans would do, and what he himself had to do.

However, what would the government's response be?

As someone with the title of a special government envoy, he should be receiving a call soon.

And indeed, not a few minutes later, his communicator lit up because of an incoming transmission.

Sunny summoned the Bone Singer, enveloped his surroundings in silence, and answered.

The sharp face of Saint Cor appeared on the holographic screen, soon joined by the pleasant visage of Soul Reaper Jet. The gaunt Transcendent spoke first:

"I'll assume that both of you are already familiar with the situation. What I want to know is what caused this mess."

His grating voice sounded calm, but Sunny could feel the angry and tense undertone in it.

He briefly glanced at the projection of Jet, then answered:

"I think I can provide an explanation."

Both of them paid rapt attention to his words. Sunny lingered for a few moments, then spoke, choosing his words carefully:

"It appears that a Citadel was discovered in the Nightmare Desert. Clan Valor was the first to find it, but their attempt at capture failed. Now, both clans have an equal chance to come into possession of a crucial advantage. A direct confrontation for access to the Nightmare Gate leading to the Citadel seems inevitable."

He paused, and then added evenly:

"They are going all out."

As Saint Cor's face darkened, Jet nodded.

"I can confirm."

Sunny did not know what the veteran Saint was thinking about, but he felt chills even through the holographic projection. Even though Wake of Ruin's expression did not change much, it felt as though the world itself subtly changed instead, reacting to his… wrath? Discontent? Contempt?

…Dejection, maybe?

The old man grimaced.

"What immaculate timing."

At least he could still be sarcastic.

Sunny had to imagine that the two great clans suddenly shifting to active warfare was like a disaster for the government. Saint Cor would have to completely rearrange the disposition of the Evacuation Army and come up with a new strategy. Even then, it might not be enough.

Then again, Army Command had to have been prepared for something like this, even if it was the worst-case scenario for them. They were no fools.

After a long pause, Wake of Ruin shook his head, then looked at

Sunny and Jet again.

"Valor and Song might be arrogant, but they are not unreasonable. This bloodshed can still be prevented… maybe. Similar things have happened before. A large-scale battle can be avoided if they agree to hold a duel between two champions instead."

Sunny couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. He didn't doubt the wisdom and experience of the seasoned Transcendent, but he also didn't believe that the great clans would step down. Especially not because of something as quaint as an honor duel.

They were like sharks that smelled blood in the water — those from Valor were, at least. They had been holding back their bloodlust for too long, already.

Still… was there really a chance that a strange duel between two powerful warriors could replace a wasteful battle? It seemed improbable, but then again, Legacies were often weird about such things.

Saint Cor let out a heavy sigh, and then added:

"The problem this time is that both sides seem to be certain that they will win if the battle actually happens. So, they have no reason to seek an alternative. Additionally, they have been acting slightly… erratic… as of late. It is hard to say what will actually happen."

Seemingly coming to a decision, the gaunt Transcended nodded and threw a piercing gaze at Sunny and Jet:

"The two of you will remain with the emissaries and follow them to that Nightmare Gate. Gather as much information as you can, while you're at it. I will arrive personally and try to mediate an acceptable resolution."

Jet remained silent for a moment.

"Understood, sir."

However, Sunny was not as agreeable.

"What if you can't?"

His irreverent question, or maybe the fact that he even dared to ask a question, seemed to surprise the old Saint. Wake of Ruin stared at him darkly.

After a brief pause, he said simply:

"Then we withdraw and try to salvage the aftermath."

With that, he terminated the call. The gaunt face of the government Saint disappeared, leaving Sunny and Jet alone.

Soul Reaper looked at him and smiled.

'How can she even smile in this situation?'

"Oh, my. I know that look. You're thinking about doing something crazy, aren't you?"

Sunny glanced at her darkly and shrugged.

"I don't even know what is crazy anymore."

Jet chuckled.

"That is not a good sign at all."

He studied her face somberly, then said quietly:

"If Wake of Ruin fails in his negotiation, Valor and Song will really clash. At that point, the best move would be to support one side against the other, in order to preserve as many fighters as possible. Are you ready to make that decision?"

Soul Reaper's smile grew bleak.

"The government can't break its neutrality. Even if it's beneficial at the moment, the consequences would be catastrophic in the long run."

Sunny simply stared at her.

"I am not asking about the government. I am asking about you."

There were times when people could not escape making tough choices. Sunny had long made his, and Jet would have to follow suit, whether she wanted to or not.

Of course, doing nothing was also a choice. However…

She had always positioned herself as a cog in the government machine, but maybe it was time for Soul Reaper to think for herself.

Sunny hoped that she would, at least.

Jet lingered for a while before answering.

Eventually, she said:

"Let's see how it goes."

Then, her face disappeared. The screen of the communicator switched off, leaving Sunny in the darkness.

He sighed and dismissed the Bone Singer, then left his temporary shelter.

'An all-out battle… or a duel of two champions… I wonder which one will end up happening?'

He hoped for the best, but had to prepare for the worst.

Chapter-1178: Long Drive

Although both clans were assembling their armies with urgent haste, it was not an easy thing to move a military force across East Antarctica. The wilderness was infested with countless abominations, and Nightmare Gates were everywhere, making every route slow and dangerous.

Clan Valor was in a slightly better position because they had coincidentally pulled most of their forces together prior to Mordret's revelation, in order to destroy a migrating horde of Nightmare Creatures. Still, there were many warriors and assets that had been left behind in the siege capitals, who now had to join the main body of the great clan's contingent.

There was Saint Tyris, for example... the fact that Dire Fang had been able to join Silent Stalker in ambushing Whispering Blade proved that she alone was not enough to contain the enemy Transcendent, so there was no point in keeping her in a distant government siege capital. So, Sky Tide had been recalled, and was en route to join the war party.

There were other Squires and even Knights that had to be summoned, as well.

So, for the first few days, progress had been slow. Most of the mundane personnel had been left behind, and now only the Awakened were following Morgan toward the fateful Nightmare Gate. Nevertheless, their number was too great to pass unnoticed, and so, skirmishes with Nightmare Creatures happened almost every hour.

Many of these skirmishes threatened to grow into something more serious if not resolved swiftly. In these cases, either Morgan's Echoes or one of the Saints joined the melee to prevent the small-scale confrontations from becoming dire battles.

Sunny was not required to participate in them, of course. Actually, he found himself in a somewhat awkward situation.

No one had really invited him to join the expedition, and his status was more vague than ever. Officially, he was the government's envoy whose duties concerned the cooperation between Clan Valor and the Evacuation Army. However, the great clan had more or less abandoned the pretense of being in the Southern Quadrant to help, and was acting against the government's interests.

So what was an envoy supposed to do in that situation, exactly?

Why was he even needed?

Sunny did not have a good explanation, but luckily, no one asked. Whether it was because the warriors of Valor couldn't be bothered or simply did not care, he did not know… in any case, they mostly left him alone.

In fact, Sunny was basically ignored. Even Morgan seemed to have forgotten about his existence, which was not too surprising — she had much bigger issues to worry about than the whereabouts of a neutral government Ascended.

So, Sunny simply stayed in one of the APCs assigned to the Fire Keepers. The Fire Keepers themselves were gone, though — most of them had already entered the Seeds — so he had the vehicle all to himself. Nephis and Cassie would appear from time to time to catch a few hours of sleep, but other than that, he remained alone.

That gave him a lot of time to think.

Sitting in the pilot's seat and driving the APC across the hellish remains of Antarctica, which looked much more like a piece of the Dream Realm now than that of the waking world, he somberly considered the past.

It was funny, really.

Sunny had come to Antarctica to pursue his personal goals, not caring much about anything else. But now, he somehow ended up caring about the mission of the Evacuation Army enough to disregard

his personal interests.

He used to mock selfless people, but now, he was ready to do something selfless at a great cost to himself.

Was it like that? No, not really. In the end, everything Sunny did was for himself. He was not trying to protect the refugees because it was the right thing to do or out of some kind of moral obligation. He was doing it simply because he wanted to. That was his desire.

He was just trying to fulfill his own desires.

Sunny had wanted to survive at all costs once, but then, it was not enough anymore. He had wanted to be strong once, but now, it was not enough anymore, either.

He had strength, but what was the point of having strength if he couldn't achieve what he wanted with it?

What Sunny really wanted now was to use his strength to shape the world in a way that suited his wishes. Shaping reality with strength…

That was power.

So, was he lusting for power now?

Controlling the APC, Sunny frowned.

Then what about freedom?

That had been his real goal all along, after all. Coming to Antarctica was a means to achieve that goal, but instead, he found himself bound to more people, more places, more things… he was more restricted now than he had ever been.

Before, what had restricted him were circumstances beyond his control. Now, he was bound by his own desires.

'...On second thought, it's not that funny.'

Sunny now understood better than ever why the Demon of Desire had been one of the most powerful among the daemons, second to none…

except for Weaver.

But was it really a bad thing?

So what if he was compelled by the things he wanted? So what if he was bound to people, ideas, and values?

Maybe it was not a bad thing, after all… simply because he had chosen these bonds himself.

Sunny understood that, and yet, a small part of him rebelled against such thoughts.

That part still wanted to be unrestrained and not beholden to anything.

To be free.

…That part had to take a backseat for now, though.

Because he had to finish what he had started. Even if it was futile, Sunny had to do his best to see the evacuation of the citizens of Antarctica through.

After that, well… he would see what else there was to do.

His dreams seemed more distant than ever, but strangely enough, Sunny found himself calm and determined. His mind was set.

Maybe that was the true conviction.

…The thought made him uncomfortable.

Chapter-1179: Measure of Growth

The war party had stopped and made camp. Sunny's APC was parked within the defensive perimeter, and he was calmly preparing supper. It seemed strange to be doing something so mundane on the verge of an event that had the potential to alter the course of history, but…

He was hungry.

Hunger was much more powerful than the forces that shaped history.

'Ah. I miss the Rhino…'

The armored vehicle that the Fire Keepers had used was by no means cheap, but its amenities were rather bare-bones. There was not even an integrated kitchen, just a few devices for food storage and preparation.

Still, he was good at improvising.

As Sunny cooked, he mentally went over what he had gained since coming to Antarctica, and what he could use if the worst happened and the two great clans clashed in a bloody battle.

Sunny had been a Master for many months before the Chain of Nightmares, but he felt that he only came into his Ascended powers here. His mastery of Shadow Manifestation had improved tremendously, both in terms of impact and versatility. He also developed Shadow Shell and Shadow Incarnation, as well as their combination — both of these abilities were extremely powerful.

His practical knowledge of sorcery had grown as well. He was now able to copy more complex enchantments, and do it faster. He could even modify them to a degree. Even though the realities of the

Antarctica campaign had prevented Sunny from spending a lot of time on weaving, his repertoire was much broader than before.

There were new powerful Memories in his arsenal, including Transcendent ones. The Sin of Solace, the Shroud of Graceless Dusk, and others… there was the Mirror of Truth, too. Chances were, he would have to use it soon.

In terms of raw power, Sunny was now a Tyrant. He had five cores and five shadows, which increased both his physical prowess and essence capacity.

Strangely enough, even his essence control had undergone a noticeable improvement — unable to rely on the Soul Serpent in the dire conditions of the Southern Quadrant, Sunny had been forced to elevate this aspect of his power to an almost flawless efficiency.

Then there were his Shadows. He had gained a new one, the Ravenous Fiend. Now that Imp had feasted on the remains of the Sun Prince, the scrawny goblin was strong enough to be sent into battle. Nightmare was close to both Ascension and unlocking his Terror Ability. Saint had risen both in Class and Rank, becoming a Transcendent Devil.

That alone was an incredible leap for him, but the sublimation of the Mantle of the Underworld was perhaps no less important. His new Attribute, the Marble Shell, improved his resilience and combat performance to a remarkable degree. Honestly, having it was almost like possessing a secondary Aspect.

Considering all that, it was hard to deny that the present Sunny was incomparably more powerful than his past self from before Antarctica. The comparison was not even funny. That past Sunny was nothing more than a feeble brat.

Ironically, Sunny had come to the Southern Quadrant in search of strength, and although he stopped caring about that goal a long time ago, he ended up achieving it nevertheless.

…Despite it all, though, he felt that there were much more valuable things he had gained here. Things that went far beyond Shadows,

Memories, and Attributes.

The experience he had gained, the skills he had honed, the lessons he had learned — those were what truly separated him from his past self. Those were what made him truly stronger.

From the darkness of the polar night and the desperation of the Antarctic Center to the cold expanse of East Antarctica and its many dangers, Sunny had grown and matured. He had gone through countless battles and achieved many improbable victories…

There had been harrowing defeats, too.

Those had taught him as well.

Preparing utensils for three people, Sunny looked into the distance and sighed.

He would be turning twenty-one in about a month… there had been a time when he was not even sure that he would make it that far, but now, here he was.

'I… don't really feel young anymore.'

Maybe someone like Wake of Ruin would laugh at these words, but Sunny truly felt that way. He had never really gotten a chance to be a child, and now, he was not a youth anymore, either.

'Am I... old, then?'

As Sunny was pondering the vicissitudes of life, the hatch of the APC opened, and Nephis came in, soon followed by Cassie. The two had been spending the last few days in endless strategy meetings, so both looked exhausted.

The smell of freshly cooked food made both of them relax. Noticing the distant expression on Sunny's face, Nephis tilted her head a little and asked:

"What are you thinking about so seriously?"

He flinched, then shook his head and continued setting the table.

"Ah, nothing serious. I was just thinking… that I'm too old for this crap."

She frowned, then pierced him with a cold gaze.

"...I'm older than you, though?"

Her meaning was clear...

Are you calling me old?!

Sunny grinned.

"Yes, yes. Forget I said anything. Come, noona, let's eat… who knows when we'll get a chance to enjoy a proper meal again…"

The two gave him strange looks and sat around the small fold-out table, looking down at the dishes he prepared. Well, really, there was just one dish — the everything potslop that Professor Obel had taught him how to make.

Sunny sat down, too, and put a generous serving on his plate.

"But honestly, you're not even a full year older than me, while Cassie is not a full year younger than me. So… let's speak comfortably…"

He put a spoonful of the weird slop into his mouth, then smiled at them.

Cassie hesitated and cautiously nudged the slop with a spoon.

"...What even is that?"

Sunny grinned.

"Ah, I am glad that you asked! This is an ancient dish that has been passed down from person to person since the Dark Times. As I was told, it was initially inspired by corpse meat…"

Chapter-1180: Cold Logic

They ate in comfortable silence. Sunny knew that both Nephis and Cassie were tired and only had a little time to rest before Morgan would need them again, so he did not waste that time with idle conversations.

It was not like he had a lot to say, anyway.

Still, there was one question that he had to ask.

Pushing the plate away, Sunny glanced at Nephis and lingered for a moment.

"I was told that there might be some kind of duel instead of a battle. Do you think it's possible?"

She did not hurry with an answer.

Neph cradled a cup of tea in her hands as she stared into the amber liquid. Eventually, she said:

"I don't know. It is… a kind of tradition. The Legacy Clans would not have survived if they resolved every conflict by spilling rivers of blood — there are actually not that many of us, after all. However, neither Valor nor Song are acting the way they used to. So it's hard to tell."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, thinking about who the champions were going to be if the duel really happened. Would the great clans send Saints to fight each other? Or Masters?

Would Morgan and Mordret cross swords and spill each other's blood?

Or would Morgan send Nephis to fight in her stead?

He just did not know.

Shifting slightly, Sunny looked at Neph and asked:

"What if the battle actually happens? Do you think that Valor can win?"

Up until now, it seemed like Clan Song was confidently pulling ahead. However, he doubted that their enemy would be easily defeated.

This time, Nephis did not hesitate at all:

"Yes."

He studied her motionless face with curiosity. Where did that confidence come from?

"Why?"

Sunny expected Neph to say something in her usual style, like "because I am with them"... or "because that is my will"....

However, she simply shook her head and said in a slightly subdued tone:

"Because they are of War."

He blinked.

Indeed, she was right. Clan Valor was the clan that had inherited the lineage of War God… the deity of warfare, life, progress, technology, craft, and intellect, as well as the patron goddess of humanity.

It was not a coincidence that they were exalted fighters, masters of forging Memories, and the most influential clan among both the Awakened and mundane humans.

They would also be the paragons of warfare.

It did not matter if Clan Song had managed to achieve slight superiority at the earlier stages of the conflict… all that mattered was

who would get the last laugh, and Sunny had no doubt that Morgan had many diabolical schemes stored in that pretty head of hers.

However, there was a slight wrinkle in that theory.

He leaned back.

"That is true. But you forget one thing… Mordret is also a descendant of War. He shared the same blood. And he is with Song."

Nephis frowned. It seemed that she indeed had not put too much weight into Mordret's presence in Antarctica. Really, she couldn't be blamed — although Sunny and Cassie had told her about their experiences in the Night Temple and the Kingdom of Hope, she had not lived through those trials herself.

She had not experienced the suffocating horror of being locked in a Citadel with that monster, watching as the number of his victims grew while the number of survivors dwindled.

Eventually, Nephis shrugged.

"It doesn't really matter, does it?"

Sunny stared at her with a dark expression.

"I think it does. Why wouldn't it?"

Neph sighed.

"What do I care if Valor wins or loses? I just need to survive. If they win and I help them, my status within the clan will grow. If they lose and I survive, it will grow even more — simply because there will be fewer powerful warriors for the clan to lean on. In their absence, my importance will grow. Either way, many members of both Valor and Song will die."

As she spoke the last words, white sparks ignited in her eyes.

Suddenly, the interior of the APC seemed to be filled with incinerating heat.

Nephis had been acting strangely placid for a long time, so Sunny almost forgot how frightening her murderous obsession was. He looked at her, surprised by that cold logic.

Well, she was right, in a way. But…

"It matters to me, though."

Nephis blinked a couple of times, startled, then looked at him in confusion.

"...Why?"

Sunny frowned.

"Because these people that are going to die are supposed to be protecting the refugees from the hordes of Nightmare Creatures. Who is going to do that if the bastards all kill each other?"

Neph seemed as if she didn't know what to say. She remained silent for a long time, then sighed.

"...I wouldn't put my faith in the great clans. Doing so will only lead to ruin."

Sunny chuckled, thinking how funny that sounded coming from her. Shaking his head, he then looked at Cassie, who had been silent until now.

"What about you? What do you think? Any helpful visions of the future?"

Cassie smiled weakly.

"...No. No helpful visions."

She touched her hair, and then suddenly said:

"Oh, but I think that you should check on Rain."

Sunny flinched. His eyes widened.

"Why? Have you seen something?"

Cassie tilted her head, then paled slightly and looked away in embarrassment.

"Ah… I'm sorry. I worded that poorly, I think… no, I haven't seen anything. It's just that we are going to venture deep into the wilderness, and who knows what will happen next. Chances are, we're not going to have access to the network for a while, so… you mentioned that you're exchanging messages, and she might get worried…"

Sunny stared at the blind girl for a few moments, flabbergasted. Standing up, he picked up the plates and walked away to clean them.

"Gods… think before you speak next time, alright? You almost gave me a heart attack, damn it. Go to sleep, you two…"

Nephis and Cassie climbed into the sleeping niches while he washed the dishes. Once that was done, Sunny threw an irritated look at the niche where the blind girl was sleeping and grimaced.

'She is right, though… I might not be able to send a message to Rain for a while.'

Settling in the pilot's chair, he took out his communicator and checked his messages. To his relief, Rain was perfectly fine — she was going to school, training, and showing zero symptoms of being infected by the Nightmare Spell.

Soul Serpent was with her, as well, so Sunny allowed himself to calm down.

He stared at the screen of the communicator for a while, then sighed and started typing.

"...Yeah, I'm doing well. Naturally. Remember that promotion I wrote about? Well, I am a glorified pencil pusher now. Most of my duties have to do with confirming requisition requests and forwarding letters. Honestly, it's driving me crazy… scouting the wild expanses of the Southern Quadrant alone was much more fun!

Anyway… I've been thinking about this and that recently. Like what I want to do with my life, and how I'm not that young anymore. Stupid

stuff like that. So… this is what I was thinking about…"

As he typed the long message, the cold sun slowly moved across the sky outside the APC, never falling behind the horizon.

The day never seemed to end, but time was flowing by.

Soon, the forces of two great clans were going to meet in the wilderness of East Antarctica.

…The outcome of their ill-fated clash could very well decide the fate of the dying continent.

Chapter-1181: Three Armies

Sunny climbed to the roof of the APC and looked at the ravaged plain of East Antarctica, which stretched in all directions as far as the eye could see.

He could have sent his shadows instead, but on a day like today, Sunny wanted to see it all with his own eyes

The ground was grey, and the stormy sky was grey, too. The ribbons of shallow brooks and the distant lakes were dark, resembling lead. The world seemed to have grown deathly silent, like a predator preparing to lunge at its prey. The air was brimming with suffocating tension.

In front of him, at some distance, an abandoned outpost could be seen, tilted and with its alloy walls ripped open. There was an ugly black rift of a Nightmare Gate shimmering with darkness in front of the desolate fortress, and near it, indifferent to the maddening whispers of the Call, a small figure could be seen, sitting on the ground.

It was hard to tell anything about the figure from that distance, except for the fact that it was a human.

...Surrounding the outpost from three directions, three armies were preparing to advance.

The great clan Valor, the great clan Song, and the hastily assembled government force that was supposed to mediate a compromise… through effort and a bit of luck — or misfortune, depending on how one looked at it — all of them had reached the Nightmare Gate on the same day.

Then again, maybe it was part of some insane calculation. The Gate was situated at the very border between the territories of the two

clans, and at that point, Sunny wouldn't be surprised by anything.

He was still with the war party of Clan Valor. The Awakened warriors had already disembarked from the transports, and were now silently assembling into a battle formation. Those that would be fighting on foot were positioned at the center, and those that rode Echo mounts were assembled at the flanks.

Five people stood in front of the loose phalanx — Morgan, Madoc, Nephis, Saint Tyris, and the Summer Knight.

Opposite them was a much larger force. Sunny could not really see, but he knew that Beastmaster, Silent Stalker, Dire Fang, and Seishan were leading it. Behind them were the Awakened warriors of Song… and, surrounding the Awakened, was a sea of enthralled Nightmare Creatures. Countless thralls were standing motionlessly, as if frozen in place.

It was eerie and deeply disturbing to see the abominable monsters acting so subdued and obedient.

The government force was by far the smallest of the three, numbering just a hundred Awakened or so. Even though they were too far away to make out details, Sunny felt an overpowering sense of unease radiating from their small formation.

Well, they were right to feel scared.

Not only could the plain soon become a battlefield, but the abandoned outpost — and the Nightmare Gate in front of it — were deep within the hunting grounds of a Corrupted Titan. The creature was nowhere in sight, for now, but there was no guarantee that it would not arrive soon, attracted by the smell of human souls and spilled blood.

'What a disaster.'

Sunny was full of hatred toward the great clans… his contempt was justly earned, too. He had personally killed many members of Song and Valor, be it through sabotage or with his own hands. And yet, he was not happy to see them preparing to slaughter each other.

He was not sad, either. Just… resigned.

In any case, there was no place for useless emotions right now. Sunny had to steel himself and prepare to do what was needed.

Neither army seemed to be moving. The wind was picking up, and the lonely figure in front of the Nightmare Gate remained motionless, as if inviting them to approach.

After a while, several people separated from the formation of the government Awakened and walked forward. As if it were a signal, Morgan took a step forward. The rest of the Valor leaders followed her, and after hesitating for a bit, Sunny jumped down from the APC and hurried to join them.

As he left the formation, he glanced at Cassie, who had stayed back and was flanked by two Knights of Valor. The blind girl seemed calm, but he could see her hands trembling slightly.

Leaving her behind, Sunny caught up with Morgan and the rest. Nephis and Tyris looked at him with inscrutable expressions, but the princess herself seemed amused by his decision to involve himself in the negotiation.

"Master Sunless… how nice of you to join us."

He glanced at her darkly and shrugged.

"Well, my boss is over there. What else am I supposed to do?"

Morgan chuckled, seemingly unbothered by the fact that she — and all her people — could very well die today.

In fact, she looked almost... excited.

"Indeed. And what does a government agent like yourself think about the situation?"

Sunny frowned.

"First of all, I am not a government agent. I just volunteered my services to the Evacuation Army, for the duration of the Antarctica

campaign. Secondly… I think that all of you have lost your minds."

Sunny had a lot of thoughts about what was happening, but it all boiled down to the fact that he still did not clearly understand the motives of the great clans. From his point of view, this whole despicable war was pure lunacy.

…Which meant a lot, coming from him.

Even if Sunny considered the desire of the Sovereigns to expand their Domains, many things still didn't make any sense. The timing of the conflict, the wasteful strategies, the excessive urgency of their actions — neither Valor nor Song were behaving normally. They were not fools, so…

There had to be something wrong with their heads, surely.

Morgan smiled.

"Lost our minds? Ah, I see. I guess it would indeed look like that, from the sidelines."

Her smile disappeared, replaced by cold ruthlessness.

"However, I can assure you. It is the world that has gone mad, not us."

After that strange remark, there was no more time to talk.

The Nightmare Gate drew nearer, and finally, Sunny could see who was waiting calmly in its shadow.

It was a slender young man clad in a suit of dark armor, with pale skin and raven-black hair. His face was sharp and thin… not exactly handsome, but at the same time charming and strangely beautiful.

His most striking feature, though, were his eyes, which didn't seem to possess a color of their own, and instead reflected the world back on itself like two pools of liquid silver.

Mordret had been crouching on the ground, his expression calm and reserved. Noticing the approaching emissaries, he slowly rose and

looked at them with cold intensity.

Sunny expected a familiar grin to appear on the lips of the Prince of Nothing, but instead, Mordret remained strangely impassive.

Then, finally, a corner of his mouth bent upward in a dark, joyless smile.

"You've finally arrived."

Chapter-1182: Good Show

"You've finally arrived."

Three groups of people stared at Mordret with different expressions.

First were the emissaries of Valor. Morgan and Madoc kept their emotions in check, while Sky Tide and Summer Knight seemed grim. Nephis was her usual indifferent self, but there was a hint of curiosity hidden in the depths of her calm grey eyes.

The emissaries of Song were less reserved. Beastmaster was looking at Mordret with barely contained anger, as were Dire Fang and Silent Stalker - the first was just as he had been, somber and savage-looking, while the latter was an unassuming and elegant woman in black leather armor. Her beautiful face was inexpressive, but there was deep contempt in her strange feline eyes. Seishan was the calmest of them. She wasn't even looking at Mordret, instead studying the faces of the champions of Valor. Jet was standing behind her quietly.

Lastly, there were the representatives of the government.

Sunny shifted uncomfortably.

'What? What the hell are they doing here?'

Saint Cor was, of course, leading the small delegation, but there were two familiar figures behind him. Kai and Effie had somehow ended up as the escorts of the government Transcendent, and were now looking at the Prince of Nothing darkly. They had never met Mordret, but the echoes of his actions had impacted them, both before the Second Nightmare and within it.

There were a couple more government Masters with Wake of Ruins, as well, but Sunny did not know them.

'Why did he have to bring those two here...'

Sunny frowned, then silently separated from the Valor emissaries and went to stand behind Saint Cor, shoulder to shoulder with Kai. Jet did the same, taking a place beside Effie.

In the silence that followed, Mordret's words hung in the cold air. The Prince of Nothing lingered for a few moments, and then looked at Morgan with those strange, mirror-like eyes.

"...Sister."

Sunny had long noticed that Morgan never used the word "brother" when speaking about Mordret. In fact, when the Reflection addressed her as "sister", she seemed to have been enraged.

He expected a similar reaction this time, too, but instead, Morgan smiled coldly.

"I have to say, I am impressed. I never imagined that you would dare to face me with your actual body. I've always regretted that I wasn't there to cut it, the last time."

Mordret looked down at himself, then raised his head and stared at his younger sister.

"Oh... this thing? Yes, it is a bit reckless of me to use it, isn't it? But then again, it's not every day that I get to meet my family. I thought that if I was going to kill you, I should do it with my own two hands."

Sunny tilted his head a little, suddenly distracted.

Come to think of it, how did Mordret's own body end up here? His original one had been destroyed by Clan Valor, but the Spell had to have created a new one for him after the Second Nightmare. Nevertheless, it would have been incredibly hard for the Prince of Nothing to arrive in Antarctica unnoticed while wearing his own face. Taking the body of someone like Ascended Bast would have been both easier and smarter.

'Unless...'

Assuming that Mordret's body could survive while his soul was wandering someplace else, he could have just stored it somewhere and then retrieved it at the right moment. He could have even carried it with him using a special Memory... or maybe an unknown facet of his power...

Suddenly, Sunny felt a cold chill running down his spine.

...Did Mordret have a collection of human bodies he carried around in some strange mirror dimension, like a macabre wardrobe of flesh?

That sounded exactly like something the madman would do...

As he was thinking, Beastmaster suddenly spoke, her voice so friendly that it actually sounded terrifying:

"I am very sorry to interrupt this touching family reunion, but... ah... at the risk of sounding petty, could I maybe receive some explanations? Prince Mordret, if I may... why couldn't you just follow the damned plan? Don't tell me that you've been secretly working for your father this whole time. That would be... such a disappointment."

Mordret remained silent for a moment, then glanced at the alluring Saint with a somber expression.

"...It is nothing like that. Please accept my sincere apologies. During the battle to conquer Black Skull, the warriors of Valor became suspicious of my identity. So, I had no choice but to act."

Beastmaster studied his face with doubt. It seemed that she was not convinced by that rather logical explanation. However, it was not like anyone could disprove Mordret's words - and, in fact, he had no reasonable motive to lie or sabotage their plans.

Doing so would have been madness.

Mordret sighed.

"I understand why you might be angry and distrustful, my lady. But please believe me - my intention is and always has been to help your mother achieve victory over Clan Valor. My family has to pay for what they've done to me. There's no one - no one! - who wants to see them fall more than me. I would have followed the plan if there was the smallest chance of success, but now... well... all I could do is offer you my blade."

He turned to face Morgan and snarled:

"...And use it to cut the down!"

Mordret's voice sounded flawlessly impassioned and sincere. It was so compelling, actually, that Sunny almost believed him.

Of course, he knew better than to trust a single word coming out of the lying bastard's mouth.

Morgan scoffed.

"You blade? What can you even do with a blade?"

She unsheathed her own sword and leaned on it, smiling.

"Come on... show me..."

There was something... very strange about that sword. Sunny had never seen it before, and he suddenly felt chills when looking at the austere double-edged blade.

Mordret stared at the sword, as well, his expression growing bleak. After a few moments, he said quietly:

"I guess he is watching, then."

Then, his lips suddenly twisted into a dark grin.

"Well, in that case... let's give him a good show."

With that, the air around him suddenly rippled, and six mirror shards became visible, hovering above the ground.

Sunny's eyes narrowed.

'Reflections... Transcendent, all of them?'

Then, the mirror shards suddenly glinted, transforming into human figures.

Nephis finally showed a reaction, white flames ignited in her eyes.

There, surrounding Mordret, now stood six people.

...As he smiled, the Reflections of Whispering Blade, Summer Knight, Sky Tide, Beastmaster, Silent Stalker, and Dire Fang smiled with him.

Chapter-1183: One Short Word

Six Reflections… six Transcendent Beasts. All assuming the shape of the Saints of the great clans.

Sunny felt cold as he looked at the smiling faces of the simulacrums.

…And Mordret's face.

The rest of the emissaries seemed just as shaken as he was, even if some managed to hide their emotions better than others.

The representatives of Valor were, understandably, grim. Even Morgan's composure cracked for a split second, revealing a hint of weakness. Saint Cor's pale face grew even more ashen.

But even the Saints of Song appeared startled by Mordret's unexpected show of power. It seemed that they did not know the extent of his abilities as well as they had thought they did.

For a few long moments, there was nothing but chilling silence. Then, Morgan spat, her voice full of contempt:

"Am I… am I supposed to be impressed? What a… neat trick. Bravo."

Mordret's smile only widened.

It was at that moment that Wake of Ruin finally took a step forward and spoke:

"Enough! What madness is this?"

The emissaries of the two clans looked at him with unfriendly expressions. Mordret did, too, and the six Reflections turned their heads in perfect synchronicity.

The sight of them acting that way was deeply disturbing, especially

since the mirror creatures wore familiar, smiling faces.

Wake of Ruin scowled, and the subtle scent of slaughter that always followed him intensified.

"I won't pretend to have authority over your actions, Awakened of Song and Valor, but I am your elder. No matter what benefits you hope to receive from this battle, I know that your losses will be much greater. You know it too! This world of ours has withstood five decades of the Nightmare Spell, and your families rose from that chaos.

The reason they have endured while countless others were destroyed is not strength — there were others who possessed strength — but foresight and restraint. So, lower your swords!"

His grating voice echoes above the plain, making the mighty Saints of the great clans listen. Even Madoc, the oldest and most powerful among them, seemed to have some respect for Saint Cor, who came from the First Generation.

Still, Whispering Blade was not someone who lowered his head.

"...This conflict won't be decided with words, Wake of Ruin. Too much is at stake."

Saint Cor gritted his teeth.

"Ah, yes. The rulers will it, so blood must be spilled. However, you are not barbarians. You are the Legacy Clans, so act like it. Don't you have traditions and protocols for just these kinds of situations? The honorable duel, to death if need be.

Why waste the lives of your kin and soldiers when the quarrel can be resolved by two champions?"

He glared darkly at Madoc and Beastmaster, and then said:

"Or are you not certain of your strength?"

His words seemed to have an effect. Sunny held his breath, not even daring to think whether a peaceful — comparatively — resolution

was really possible.

One person dying was infinitely better than numerous Awakened warriors slaughtering each other.

So many problems would go away if the damned great clans agreed with the proposal of Saint Cor. He was old and wise, after all. He had seen and survived more than any of them. He must have seen a fair share of such duels, as well.

If only Morgan and Beastmaster were able to swallow their pride and agree to a compromise…

However, Sunny just could not see Morgan backing off after being provoked by her brother. She had been waiting for an opportunity to make Song bleed for too long.

'Damnation!'

But, to his surprise…

After a long stretch of silence, Morgan slightly lowered her head and uttered through clenched teeth:

"Aye. A duel… is acceptable. We'll relinquish our claim on the Black Skull if we lose. And…"

Her vermilion eyes blazed with rage.

"I'll act as the champion of Valor myself! Who dares to face me?!"

Madoc's eyes widened slightly, and he abruptly turned to her.

"Morgan!"

The princess just smiled coldly.

"It's alright, Uncle. Say no more."

Sunny was somewhat shocked, but also cautiously excited. Furtively glancing to the side, he noticed a somber expression on Jet's face. Unlike him, she was not looking at Morgan — instead, she was

looking at the emissaries of Song.

It was surprising that the leader of Valor was willing to compromise. It was even more surprising that she had volunteered herself as the champion — Sunny was not sure what the rules of these duels were, but he suspected that Beastmaster could simply send one of her Saints to fight, thus killing Anvil's only heir and securing the right to capture the Black Skull in one fell swoop.

Was Morgan that desperate?

Well… she had all the reasons to be. The forces of Song had already been more powerful than her own, considering the sea of Nightmare Creatures ruled by Beastmaster. With the addition of six Transcendent Reflections, it was as if Song now possessed nine Saints as opposed to Valor's three.

Was that why she had not only accepted the duel, but also tried to make it seem more alluring to the enemy by volunteering herself as a sacrificial offering?

Sunny suddenly felt his heart grow cold.

But if she did… then, following the same logic… wouldn't it mean that Beastmaster had no reason to accept the duel?

Wake of Ruin let out a small, almost unnoticeable sigh of relief and turned to the emissaries of Song.

"Morgan of Valor has agreed to be the champion in the honorable duel. Who will your champion be, daughters of Song?"

'Curse it all…'

Beastmaster remained silent for a few long moments, looking at Morgan with a soft smile. She seemed to be contemplating something.

Then, she answered simply:

"No."

That short word sounded like the horn of the apocalypse to Sunny.

Wake of Ruin froze:

"...What? What do you…"

Beastmaster took a step forward, the same soft smile illuminating her stunningly beautiful face.

"I said no. There will be no duel. There will be no compromise. There will be no foresight and restraint… no more deals, no more alliances. Only bloodshed. Only war.

How does that sound, Morgan? Doesn't it sound nice?"

She might have considered a duel if her side was not overwhelmingly stronger. But with the six Transcendent Reflections Mordret had somehow nurtured, the scales of power between Valor and Song had become tilted too much in favor of Song.

In the end, it was those Reflections that made the compromise impossible.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'That bastard...'

Wake of Ruin hesitated.

"Don't be unreasonable…"

However, he was interrupted by Morgan herself:

"Enough!"

Her face was pale, but her vermilion eyes burned with sharp, piercing fury.

"You want war, worms? Good. I like it! I'll show you war…"

Chapter-1184: The Final Argument

Just like that — and, perhaps, just as expected — the last opportunity to avoid disaster slipped away from their grasp. Saint Cor desperately tried to salvage the situation, but it was hopeless.

The armies of both clans were fully prepared to annihilate the enemy, and perhaps be annihilated themselves, on that cold November day. Their bloodlust could not be quenched with words.

The fates of countless civilians were about to be decided on a battlefield where humans would be killing other humans, not the Nightmare Creatures.

No… there would be Nightmare Creatures, too. A sea of abominations would be killing humans on the orders of a Saint.

Somehow, that fact made the whole situation even sadder.

'The gods and the daemons had fought side by side against the Unknown, too... but, in the end, they slaughtered each other.'

The battle did not start immediately. Sunny half-expected the emissaries to lunge forward without wasting even a single second, but after exchanging murderous gazes, they simply turned around to return to their soldiers.

The cold sky was full of heavy clouds, plunging the world into grey twilight.

The leaders of the two armies were leaving to prepare for battle. Mordret stared at the backs of Morgan and Madoc for a few moments, then threw a quick glance at Sunny and smiled.

With that, he left with Seishan, and his Reflections followed.

Wake of Ruin was motionless, looking at the ground. Somehow, he looked older than usual.

A heavy sigh escaped from the Saint's lips.

"Ah… the world is changing too quickly. Or is it me who can't keep up anymore?"

He lingered for a few moments, then looked at the Ascended of the Evacuation Army with a heavy gaze.

Wake of Ruin hesitated, as if wanting to say something, but then simply shook his head.

"Withdraw."

The Ascended shifted, preparing to follow his command.

…But Sunny didn't.

Instead, he grimaced and took a step away, in the direction where the emissaries of Valor were walking.

Noticing his movement, Saint Cor frowned.

"What do you think you're doing, young man?"

Sunny stopped and looked at him calmly.

"What am I doing? I'm doing my best to make sure that as many people as possible are evacuated safely. That's the mission I signed up for when I joined the First Evacuation Army. What are you doing?"

The old Saint stared at him incredulously. Then, sparks of dark anger ignited in his eyes.

Standing under the wrathful gaze of a Saint was nothing short of suffocating.

"Don't question my determination, Major Sunless. The government has never broken its neutrality! That is the only way to sustain this

world. That is how we prevent it from being destroyed and how we save lives."

Sunny truly respected Wake of Ruin. No matter how unpleasant the government Trascendent was, he had nothing but admiration for the old man.

However, he was fed up with empty words.

Glaring at Saint Cor without looking away, Sunny gritted his teeth.

"...Tell that to the millions of people who died in Falcon Scott. Tell that to the families of the soldiers who died under my command. Go tell the people who are going to die because we did nothing today that their lives were sacrificed for the sake of your damned neutrality. Better yet, go to the outskirts and explain to the people there how the government is sustaining them.

Or don't… to be honest, I don't care. I'm still going to fight."

Wake of Ruin grimaced.

"You foolish brat… don't be blinded by short-term benefits! We can get involved today, but what will happen tomorrow? What will happen a year from today, ten years? Stand down!"

The Saint was seriously angry. For a moment, Sunny even felt as if his life was in danger…

But then, suddenly, Jet calmly walked away from the government Ascended and stood shoulder to shoulder with him.

Saint Cor scowled.

"Reaper, what the hell are you…"

Jet shook her head.

"Calm down, old man. Sunny is right… we can't compromise and bide our time anymore. You said it yourself — the world is changing. Old tactics won't work. Going forward, there won't be any easy decisions."

Before he could answer, she looked at Sunny and added:

"And you, watch your tone. The old man is right, too. If the government decides to start openly choosing sides, there won't be a government in a few months. Can you imagine what will happen next?"

Sunny blinked, while Saint Cor pierced her with a cold look.

"...You say these things, but you're standing by his side. Am I missing something?"

Jet shrugged and grinned.

"Well, it would be scandalous if the legendary Wake of Ruin fought under the banner of Clan Valor. But… a couple of renegade Masters? No one will bat an eye. The government must stay neutral, but that doesn't mean that I have to. I am my own person, after all. Or have you forgotten that fact?"

Her voice was calm and friendly, but the last words sounded cold.

It was as if the temperature of the air around them dropped by a couple degrees.

Saint Cor shook his head.

"Don't do anything stupid, Jet."

But she simply stared at him silently for a few moments, unmoved.

Eventually, Wake of Ruin grimaced and turned away. He didn't say anything more, either.

But somehow, it felt as though their silence conveyed too much meaning.

As the old Saint walked away, Kai and Effie looked at Sunny with tense expressions. He could understand a lot from their eyes, as well. It was as though the three of them were having a silent conversation…

But in the end, Sunny just shook his head.

He knew what his friends wanted to do. They were willing to join him — not for any poignant reason, but simply because he was their friend. Nephis and Cassie were, too.

But, considering how things went, many people could die today. Someone had to stay alive to pick up the pieces.

So, he silently sent them away.

Maybe it was a bit hypocritical of him to refuse their help after proclaiming that he would do anything in his power to save as many people as possible. But Effie and Kai were people, too.

He wanted to save them, as well.

So, they left with Saint Cor.

Sunny and Jet, meanwhile, hurried to catch up with the retreating emissaries of Valor.

When they did, he suddenly felt cold and confused.

Sunny had decided to help one of the sides achieve as clean of a victory as possible…

But, with how things had turned out, was it even possible for Valor to win?

From the looks of it, it was Song who held an overwhelming advantage. If anything, he should be helping them…

Full of uneasy thoughts, Sunny stole a glance at Morgan.

She must have understood how desperate her army's situation was, as well. He had expected to see a grim expression on her face… fear, even...

But, to his surprise, Morgan was walking while hiding a satisfied smile.

Sunny's eyes narrowed slightly.

'...What the hell is she smiling about?'

Chapter-1185: Before the Battle Starts

They returned to the army of the great clan Valor. The rows of Squires were standing under the dull sky, with dozens of Knights placed loosely throughout the formation. Most of them wore suits of masterfully crafted plate armor, some holding shields. Surprisingly, very few had already summoned their weapons, as if waiting for something.

Looking at the hundreds of Awakened who were calmly preparing for battle, Sunny couldn't help but feel a strange incongruity.

This was not the largest military force he had seen, by far. During the Antarctica campaign, Sunny had witnessed great masses of human warriors clash with boundless hordes of abominations… tens or thousands of soldiers and scores of hulking MWPs, supported by numerous turrets, artillery vehicles, and thunderous rail guns that rained fire on the enemy.

The armies of the two great clans were modest, in comparison. There were maybe two thousand Awakened gathered on the gloomy plain, with a scattering of Echoes supporting them. There was the dark river of Nightmare Creatures enthralled by Beastmaster, as well… but overall, it all seemed strangely insignificant in scope and scale.

However, he couldn't shake off the feeling that the small number of warriors in front of him were much more dire of a force than any he had seen before.

And then there were the Saints.

Whispering Blade, Sky Tide, Summer Knight… Beastmaster, Silent Stalker, Dire Fang.

Mordret's Reflections, Morgan's Echoes.

There were Sunny and Nephis, as well.

'This... is going to be a massacre.'

Sunny was not a member of Clan Valor, and as such, he was not familiar with the nuances of their training. Not really knowing where to place himself, he simply walked over to where Nephis and Cassie were standing. Jet followed, summoning an unfamiliar glaive.

Coincidentally, that placed them near Morgan, as well.

The Princess of War gave them a curious look.

"Master Sunless, Master Jet… what a nice surprise to see you here. Have you decided to keep us company today?"

She briefly glanced at Nephis and smiled.

Sunny lingered for a bit, then shrugged.

"Yes. We have our reasons."

Jet was more direct. Looking at Morgan with a carefree expression, she nodded.

"Indeed. Someone has to keep you bastards alive, so that you could keep everyone else alive."

Morgan stared at her for a few moments, then suddenly laughed.

"Well said!"

With that, she seemed to have lost interest in the two of them. A hurricane of white sparks suddenly rose around her, and one after another, Echoes started to manifest themselves on the barren soil of East Antarctica.

Sunny recognized some of them, but some he saw for the first time. All in all, there were twenty Transcendent creatures under Morgan's control, including the familiar tortoise with a stone fort on its

carapace.

This time, it seemed, the towering creature was not going to be used as a mobile command center — instead, Awakened armed with bows and possessing sorcerous Aspects climbed into the fort, turning the Echo into a walking siege tower.

Not too long ago, Sunny had been stunned by the sight of Morgan's Transcendent Echoes. However, now that he had seen Mordret's Reflections, they did not seem so domineering anymore.

More than that, the daughters of Ki Song had to possess a few powerful Echoes of their own, without a doubt.

They had an overwhelming advantage in this battle… both in terms of low-level combatants and dreadful powerhouses, Song was far ahead of Valor. The only disadvantage they had was that Beastmaster, despite her diabolical power, was no match for Whispering Blade in a direct confrontation.

Was that what Morgan was betting on?

How was she planning to win?

He hesitated for a few moments, then went ahead and asked:

"Not to sound presumptuous, Lady Morgan… but isn't our situation a bit too hopeless?"

She glanced at him, then smiled darkly. Her vermilion eyes seemed to shine in the gloomy twilight of the cloudy day.

"Hopeless? Ah… on the contrary, Master Sunless. The situation can be said to be in our favor."

Morgan looked in the direction where the forces of Song were making their final preparations and shook her head.

"Were you that impressed by the little trick that person pulled? Don't be. Those Reflections of his are not as dangerous as they might seem. You see, human Saints can be considered Transcendent Beasts, but they are so much more than that — by virtue of being human. Those

mirror creatures, however, are just that… creatures. And as such, they are bound by the same limitations."

Her expression grew cold as she continued:

"In other words, while the Reflections can copy the appearance, Attributes, and even Aspect Abilities of a Saint, they can't copy that which makes humans unique among Beasts. Most importantly of all, they can only possess the same level of intelligence as a Beast creature would… have you noticed how they seemed to repeat everything that he did?

That is because, while powerful, they are nearly mindless at that stage. Unless controlled directly by their creator, these Reflections can pose a serious threat… but not nearly as serious of a threat as actual Saints would."

Sunny looked at her with a frown. What Morgan said made sense… the Reflections could copy the powers of a Saint, but they could not become a Saint. The Mirror Beast he had faced on the Reckoning Island was vastly different, and much more dangerous, because it was a Devil. Its intelligence had not been inferior to that of a human.

Still… six reflected Saints, no matter how mindless, were incomparably more powerful than six Transcendent Beasts would have been. Because they, too, possessed Aspect powers of the humans they reflected.

Noticing his doubt, Morgan smiled.

"Don't be so concerned, Master Sunless. I was surprised by their appearance, as well. Without the Reflections… I'd say that our victory was all but assured. With them added to the board, well, I guess that each side has an equal chance to prevail. All that remains is to fight.

Either we win, or we lose — the outcome of the battle will be decided by nothing except the personal strength, skill, and resolve of those fighting. Ah, what a brilliant day..."

Chapter-1186: Final Preparations

Morgan studied the distant army of Song and inhaled deeply.

Then, her face grew slightly somber.

"...There are countless nuances to war, Master Sunless, but at its core, war is simple. All there is to it is power, and application of power. The former is important, but the latter is more so. There is no point in being strong if one can't properly exert their strength, after all. The daughters of Ki Song might think that they possess more power… but look at them.

I have them exactly where I wanted them, even if the path to this moment was not what I expected it to be. Ah, but that is another thing… one has to be flexible when waging war… rigid things are always the first to break…"

With a chill, Sunny realized that Morgan had been acting throughout the entire attempt at negotiations. She had never wanted the duel to happen. She had never wanted to avoid the battle… instead, all she had wanted was to lure the enemy into committing to it.

In the end, it was Beastmaster who insisted on proceeding with the battle, thinking that she had forced Morgan into a corner...

He shook his head in amazement.

'...Why is everyone in that family so devious?'

Well, it was not like he had anything to complain about. Morgan had said a lot of things, but conveniently failed to actually answer his question and explain what exactly gave her the confidence to face the superior force of Clan Song on the battlefield. Still, her confidence

was a good sign for him.

Sunny let out a sigh.

Now, all he had to decide was how far he was willing to go to ensure that Valor achieved a sweeping victory. What was he willing to show, and what was he willing to hide?

The unpleasant answer was rather simple — Sunny had no right to hide anything. He had to give it his all unless he wanted to make every decision he had made thus far meaningless.

Even if abandoning his pretenses might end up putting him in danger…

It was time to go all out.

Morgan, meanwhile, turned to her soldiers and smiled.

Her voice echoed across the plain, sounding as sharp as a sword leaving its scabbard:

"Warriors of Valor! Today, we sanctify this field with blood. Have no fear! Have no mercy! Have no doubt!"

The thousand Awakened roared, and as they did, Morgan coldly looked at the Knights among them and gave a small nod.

In the next moment, something strange happened. Sharp steel flashed, and a dozen dead bodies fell to the ground, awash in blood. It happened so fast that no one even had a chance to react.

Morgan shook her head slightly and said with contempt:

"Did she really think that I wouldn't find her thralls…"

Then, she looked at the frozen soldiers with murderous determination, unsheathed her strange sword, and yelled:

"The traitors are dead. Be strong! Be sharp! Be my sword!"

And as she did…

The dim twilight was suddenly illuminated by a myriad of scarlet sparks. A hurricane of them, much larger than the one produced by manifesting Echoes, surrounded Morgan like a river of blood.

From that river, hundreds of swords slowly appeared, hovering above ground. All of them… all of them were Memories, and of considerable power at that. No sword was the same as the rest, each possessing a unique form, shape, and presence.

And there was something strange about these swords, too, just like there was about the one she was holding in her hand. Sunny stared at the cloud of swords, stunned, until he noticed a common detail that all of them shared.

Each had a symbol of an anvil pierced through by a sword either etched on its blade or engraved on its pommel.

'All of those… are forged Memories…'

Sunny watched as countless swords suddenly flew in different directions, each landing in the hand of an Awakened warrior. And as he did, he felt that he knew what these swords were, and who had created them.

Anvil of Valor… the King of Swords.

These swords had to be a conduit of his Domain, or at least a manifestation of his Aspect Ability.

Nephis received a silvery longsword, and Cassie received a slender rapier.

…Sunny and Jet, though, did not receive anything. Which was, honestly, a relief.

While the two of them were observing the grandiose bestowal of swords with guarded expressions, Morgan turned to them and smiled.

"Master Sunless, Master Jet… if there are any preparations you want to make, I suggest that you make them now. We are about to begin."

Jet silently leaned on her glaive, showing that she was already as

prepared as she wanted to be.

Sunny, on the other hand, did have a few things to do.

With a sigh, he called upon several Memories. The Sin of Solace, the Dying Wish, the Shadow Lantern… and Morgan's Warbow.

When scarlet sparks swarmed around his hand, Morgan tilted her head slightly, as if surprised.

When the black bow manifested itself, however, one of her eyebrows shot up.

The princess gave him a strange look.

"...That is a curious bow you have there, Master Sunless."

Sunny glanced at it and smiled.

"Ah, yes… I might have forgotten to mention… but you sort of stole my heart once, Lady Morgan. It was a truly memorable day. Well, at least for me…"

The expression on her face was hard to describe, but it became even more incredulous when Sunny threw the bow into the air.

"Wait… you are…"

A moment later, a hand in a black armored gauntlet suddenly rose from his shadow and grabbed it.

Two crimson flames ignited in the darkness, and then, a towering figure in a fearsome suit of onyx armor stepped from the shadow, her silhouette both graceful and frightening.

Saint remained motionless, observing the distant army of the great clan Song with utter indifference.

Then, a demonic black steed rose from the shadows, wreathed in darkness. Nightmare lowered his head, light reflecting on his adamantine horns.

Lastly, a small fiendish creature made entirely of black steel appeared, staring at the horde of enthralled Nightmare Creatures with unmistakable hunger.

Shadows moved, flowing onto Sunny's body.

As they did, the light of day suddenly seemed darker and less substantial around them.

He placed the Sin of Solace on his shoulder and looked at Morgan.

"...Now, I'm ready."

Chapter-1187: Battle of the Black Skull (1)

There were a lot of startled glances directed at Sunny. Of course, it couldn't be helped — even though he was a Master, thus receiving a certain amount of respect and veneration from all Awakened, the warriors of a great clan still tended to treat government soldiers with a bit of disdain.

Watching a mere government envoy, no matter how distinguished, pull out two Transcendent Devils and a Terror out of nowhere must have been a bit of a shock for them. Especially because of how unlike the retainers of Valor Sunny looked — he was neither tall nor physically imposing, and in fact appeared more slender than athletic.

In addition, while pretty much everyone around him was clad in a suit of heavy plate armor, he wore only a light tunic and a pair of dainty silk shoes.

It was almost as if Sunny was not taking the situation seriously.

…Or was powerful enough to be able to disregard the protection of durable armor despite the dire danger of the situation.

There was one intangible quality, though, that convinced the warriors of Valor that it was the latter rather than the former.

Presence.

It was not a secret that Saints possessed a certain presence about them, and the most powerful of Masters did, too. Like Jet who emanated an illusory aura of cold, or Nephis who sometimes seemed to illuminate the space around her.

Presence was often hard to describe, but it was unmistakable. And

the feeling Sunny gave off when he got serious was of the dark, cold, and deeply frightening variety.

Like staring into the eyes of your killer, or maybe even of death itself.

So, the warriors of Valor were more than a little surprised.

Obviously, Morgan was surprised the most.

She stared at Sunny for a few long moments with a somewhat comical expression, then slowly shook her head and turned away.

"You are a man who is full of surprises, Master Sunless. This is a good thing… we might need to pull off a miracle or two today, in order to survive."

No matter how amused and curious she was, now was not the time to engage in these kinds of emotions.

The battle was about to start.

In fact, it was already starting…

The government forces had withdrawn, but remained at a distance to observe the clash. The two armies were moving now…

On the side of Song, a tide of Nightmare Creatures surged forward, and, shielded by it, the Awakened followed. Sunny could not see the Reflections and the Saints, but he knew that they were out there, somewhere. Ready to strike.

On the side of Valor, the mounted warriors shook the ground as they moved forward, gaining speed for a devastating charge. The phalanx of Awakened marched forward behind them, in perfect synchronicity, their formation like a wall of steel.

Whispering Blade suddenly seemed to disappear. Saint Tyris rose into the air, assuming the form of the steel-winged thunderbird. The wind roared as she flew forward, and lightning danced around her body. Summer Knight was at the tip of the wedge formation of the charging cavalry, his lance shining with resplendent light.

Saint was galloping atop Nightmare side by side with him, drawing her bow with calm grace.

'Gods…'

Sunny was pulled forward, as well, following Nephis and Morgan. Jet and Cassie were near them, both with grim expressions on their faces. Only Imp seemed unaffected by the dreadful scale and meaning of the scene in front of them, scurrying forward with a wicked grin.

'We are really doing it, aren't we?'

As soon as he thought it...

The world shook.

Not too far ahead, a cloud of arrows rose from the ranks of Song's Awakened, followed by a swarm of winged abominations. All of them shot toward Sky Tide, aiming to intercept her.

At the same time, the charging cavalry clashed with the sea of Nightmare Creatures. Just as it did, a swift black silhouette suddenly emerged from the mass of them and descended on Sir Gilead. In a flash of claws of crimson eyes, Sunny made out the figure of a giant, monstrous panther that had swiped at the Saint's Echo mount with her claws…

Silent Stalker had finally shown her Transformation Ability.

Then, there was only chaos.

A battle between Awakened could not be controlled, simply because of the nature of the people participating in it. Each of the soldiers possessed unique Abilities and skills derived from them — no general, no matter how talented, could truly calculate and effectively guide such a great number of unpredictable variables.

It was as though two thousand devils were unleashed onto the desolate plain, burning with the murderous desire to destroy each other.

All that the leaders of the two armies could do was set certain tactics

in motion and hope for the best.

...And fight.

In the war of Awakened, the personal valor of the combatants was much more important than in a battle of mundane soldiers, or even in one against Nightmare Creatures.

Which meant that a single individual's contribution could also exert great influence on the outcome.

This was what Sunny hoped for, at least.

However, watching Valor cavalry collide with Beastmaster's thralls, he was suddenly not sure if anything he could do would make a difference.

'Of course, it can. There aren't that many Masters here, and among them, only Nephis and Mordret can be compared to me. With my Shadows, I am almost as valuable as a Saint… so… I need to throw these doubts away, and fight…'

As the havoc of the bloody melee drew nearer, threatening to swallow the battle formation of Valor, Sunny suddenly heard the exhilarated voice of the Sin of Solace laughing in his ear:

"...Fight, fight, fight… all you ever do is fight, but what have you achieved? Nothing! You failed your soldiers, you failed the people you wanted to protect, and on top of that, you even ended up in the exact place that you had wanted to escape. Pitiful fool… do you really think that today will be any different?"

Sunny could even see a shadowy figure following him, its features more distinct and pronounced than ever.

He smiled crookedly.

'Ah, it's you. You're just in time… come on, bastard. Watch me…'

Then, there was no more time for idle thoughts.

The cavalry had cut through the river of thralls and drowned in the

ranks of Song's Awakened. The tide of abominations, meanwhile, was already mere meters away…

Gritting his teeth, Sunny brandished the jade sword.

…And called upon the shadows.

Chapter-1188: Battle of the Black Skull (2)

The battle formation of Clan Valor was steadily advancing while keeping its shape, but Sunny was a poor fit for their polished tactics.

Someone needed to break the momentum of the horde of the Beastmaster's thralls, anyway. There was a sea of them, ranging from pitiful Dormant vermin to frightening Corrupted behemoths. The charge of the cavalry had destroyed some, but countless more remained.

Looking at the surging mass of abominations, Sunny couldn't help but feel a shiver run down his spine. Beastmaster… her power was truly great and terrible.

But then, he could be terrible himself.

As Sunny unleashed the shadows contained within his divine lantern, a tide of darkness suddenly spread from his feet, reaching into the attacking horde.

A moment later, it came alive.

'Kill!'

Sunny had come a long way in his mastery of Shadow Manifestation. From swiping a piece of trash from his kitchen table to binding a titan and beyond, he had never stopped improving. And now, it was time to make use of all those lessons for one single purpose.

Maximum devastation.

…The darkness came alive, and countless inky-black hands suddenly rose from it. They grabbed the lunging abominations, tearing their

flesh with long obsidian claws. A wide swath of the horde was instantly turned into a harrowing hellscape of moving shadows, spilling blood, and mutilated bodies. There was a cacophony of piercing shrieks and howls, too, all of them full of chilling agony.

Sunny paid no attention to the reactions of the warriors of Valor. His mind was in a state of battle clarity and augmented by the Shroud of Dusk on top of that, but still, it took every bit of his mental ability to control that many manifested shadows.

He felt as though his brain was going to explode, but as a result, the destruction he had perpetrated was on such a large scale that it almost seemed like the work of some profane deity.

He only maintained it for a few short seconds, not wishing to burn too much essence, but that was more than enough — the center of the horde was utterly broken, its momentum spent.

Somewhere to his left, a blinding flash suddenly illuminated the world, and another chunk of the thralls was swallowed by furious white flames.

As soon as the darkness dissipated and the white flames dissolved, the vanguard of the Valor force — Sunny, Nephis, Morgan, and Jet — were already upon the enthralled monsters.

Nephis was clad in an intricate black armor, with soft white radiance spilling from its seams. Her longsword, however, shone the brightest, cutting through the Nightmare Creatures like a ray of incinerating starlight. She moved with the stunning speed and ruthless elegance of a heaven-born killer.

Jet was almost as deadly, although her battle style seemed much less refined. It was all about efficiency, practicality, and butchery — even though her strikes left no marks on the bodies of her victims, the kills somehow looked more savage.

Morgan, meanwhile, was like a hurricane of steel. Everything around her was cut and sliced to pieces, as if she was surrounded by a shifting field of some invisible severing force. However, there was no force — there was only Morgan herself, her body, and her sword. She

was like a streak of black and vermilion, leaving misty crimson clouds in her wake.

And then there was Sunny himself. This early into the battle, he was conserving his essence, so there was nothing flashy about how he fought. It was best described by the word elusive — he danced between the abominations like a shadow, easily evading the deluge of attacks and sometimes delivering swift strikes of his own.

Although these strikes did not seem too powerful and only left behind small wounds, they somehow never failed to bring the creatures down.

Just a few moments after the four of them dove into the horde of thralls, the battle formation of Clan Valor finally connected with the enemy.

Swords rose and fell. Arrows flew. Hundreds of Aspect Abilities activated in unthinkable harmony.

Blood spilled on the ground.

Sunny was startled.

'What… what the hell is this…'

There was a limit to training and being familiar with the powers of your comrades. Sunny knew it better than most, since he had been a part of an Awakened cohort before, and even led one for a period of time. He had been in command of large military forces, too.

So, Sunny understood very well just how important synergy and synchronicity really were. Only when the cooperation between the members of a cohort reached the level where they could move as a single whole without the need for words would the cohort have a chance to survive.

However, cohorts were usually small for a good reason. With how different and unpredictable Aspect powers were, it was nearly impossible to bring them together in harmony — and the more Awakened there were, the more difficult that task was. The difficulty grew exponentially.

What the army of Valor showed, however, was a level of unity that went beyond reason. It was not exactly perfect, but close enough to perfection to be startling. Their battle formation seemed less like hundreds of warriors fighting side by side, and more like a single being with a thousand arms and a thousand heads.

Like a perfectly crafted war machine.

It was honestly a bit frightening.

'Damn…'

Carving a bloody path through the thralls, Sunny couldn't help but pay attention to the battle formation of Clan Valor. It steadily advanced, withstanding the pressure of the horde of Nightmare Creatures like a moving fortress of steel.

Countless abominations were dying beneath the sharp swords of the Awakened warriors, and when an especially powerful creature attacked, one of the Knights would step forward to face it.

Arrows rained without stop. The giant tortoise was marching behind the formation, serving as a mobile fort… but even its presence could not explain how the archers were so effective in slaying the enemies without ever putting their allies in danger.

'...It's the swords.'

Sunny did not have any reason to come to that conclusion, but he felt that he was right. This incredible, almost unnatural level of unity between the hundreds of Awakened warriors of the great clan Valor had to have something to do with the swords forged and bestowed on them by their Sovereign.

'No wonder Clan Valor is famed for its battle prowess.'

Just how deadly would perfect cooperation be in a war?

Sunny quickly adjusted his understanding of the battle, accounting for the new variable.

The boon of the forged swords was, without a doubt, a powerful

advantage — much more powerful than one would think.

But would that boon alone be enough to turn the tide of the battle?

Somehow, it didn't seem like it.

No matter how Sunny looked at it, the position of Valor was still incredibly weak.

'What is Morgan thinking?'

Chapter-1189: Battle of the Black Skull (3)

It seemed as if the world was ending.

Even more than during the battle against the titanic horde or in Falcon Scott, it seemed like the world was breaking apart.

There had been clashes of similar scale in Antarctica, but at least there was some logic and structure to them. The thunderous roars of the railguns, the orderly formations of mundane soldiers, the power of the Awakened, the demented fury of the Nightmare Creatures — no matter how frenzied a battle was, there was a distinction between the clashing sides, at least.

Today, it was just chaos.

Thousands of Aspects tearing the ground and the sky apart. Awakened, Masters, Echoes, and enthralled Nightmare Creatures intertwined in murderous violence. Even the Saints were fighting each other, making the world shake with each strike.

Somewhere not too far away, Silent Stalker was entangled with Sir Gilead. The monstrous black panther had long ago ripped Summer Knight's mount apart with her claws, and was now trying to extinguish the valiant Saint himself. It was not that easy to do, because he had transformed, as well.

Where a handsome knight in resplendent armor had been, there was now an ethereal figure that seemed to be made of pure sunlight. The figure was human-like and of the same height as Sir Gilead, but every time Silent Stalker struck at it, her claws simply passed through the light, not leaving any wounds on Summer Knight's shining body.

When he lashed out with his sword, however, deep wounds were left

on the panther's sable hide. Silent Stalker did not seem to pay them any attention.

…As they continued to fight, the radiance of the luminous figure was slowly growing bleaker.

On another spot of the battlefield, the ground trembled as a giant thunderbird fell from the skies. Sky Tide had withstood the rain of arrows and slaughtered the swarm of winged thralls, but then, it was as if a wall of invisible force crashed into her.

Saint Tyris rolled on the ground, unable to sustain her Transformation anymore, and knelt while grabbing her head. Her beautiful face was pale, and there was a dazed look in her eyes. She glanced at the distant formation of Clan Song, where Beastmaster was hidden, concentrating her incredible power to deliver a terrible mental attack.

Then, still kneeling, Sky Tide outstretched her hand and summoned her sword. As she slowly rose to her feet, swaying, a rush of Nightmare Creatures and enemy Ascended was already closing in on her.

Somewhere else, four Reflections were entangled in a strange fight with the wind. The lightning-wreathed thunderbird, a creature that looked like a towering hybrid between a wolf and a human, and a devilishly beautiful woman were launching one attack after another against an invisible opponent. There was a fourth mirror creature, as well, but it was as unseen as their adversary.

Whispering Blade alone was pushing back the Reflections of Sky Tide, Dire Fang, Beastmaster, and himself. It was impossible to say which side was winning, since the mirror creatures did not express any emotions, and Madoc himself could not be seen. However, their clash was far from reaching a conclusion.

Some distance away, Saint was fighting against the Reflection of Summer Knight. She had sent Nightmare away and stood alone against the radiant warrior made of sunlight, her black sword clashing against his shining blade with murderous intent.

Two knights — one ominous and wreathed in darkness, the other resplendent and suffused with warm radiance — were like night and day, and their furious clash instilled fear into the hearts of anyone who witnessed it.

Nightmare, meanwhile, had attacked the Awakened warriors of Song, but was thwarted by the Reflection of Silent Stalker. The black steed was almost caught in the maw of the giant panther, but then, a scrawny figure of dark metal suddenly leaped on the mirror creature's back, grabbing onto it with sharp claws and sinking his irresistible teeth into the beast's hide.

The three of them turned into a whirlwind of darkness, demolishing anything that got in their way.

The battle formation of Clan Valor had cut through the horde of thralls and collided with the Awakened of Song. Despite their unnatural unity, it was impossible to maintain the phalanx after that — soon, the battle inevitably descended into utter mayhem.

Awakened fought against Awakened, and Masters fought against Masters. Here and there, some managed to stay close to their cohort, while others were completely isolated and faced the enemy alone. Humans and Echoes were thrown together into a disorderly mess of dreadful violence and chilling cruelty.

Despite the fact that the warriors of Valor wielded swords forged by Anvil, which made them far more dangerous than they would have ordinarily been, they were still severely outnumbered. There were plenty of enthralled abominations left on the battlefield, after all.

Clan Valor was holding well, for now…

But Sunny couldn't see how they could win.

In fact, the only reason for the strained equilibrium on the battlefield was Sky Tide. There was no effective counter against her powers among the high-ranking warriors of Clan Song, and so, Beastmaster had to concentrate her fearsome mental attacks on only one person.

Now that Saint Tyris had been brought down, however, the

enchantress would be free to wreak havoc among the rest of Clan Valor's forces soon. Once that happened, the situation would very likely cascade into a disaster with terrible speed.

Apart from Saint, who was immune to mental attacks and mind manipulation, every other combatant on the battlefield would be at risk. Perhaps even Beastmaster was not powerful enough to break the will of a Transcendent instantly, but she did not need to, either.

Considering how dire the clashes between the Transcendents were already, a moment of distraction would be enough to give the enemy a crucial opportunity to deal a fatal strike.

She could turn her diabolical powers against the mass of Awakened, as well, ensuring that the spine of Valor's army was broken.

Which meant… that Beastmaster had to be stopped.

But who could stop her?

Every powerful combatant on the side of Valor was tied down. Only the Masters were relatively free, or at least could extricate themselves from the melee with relative ease.

However, among them, Sunny alone possessed the ability to bypass the mass of Song warriors and attack the alluring Saint.

Problem was… he was not sure that he would be able to withstand her power.

More than that, he simply did not know where she was.

Beastmaster was not very strong in a physical clash, so she did not show herself freely.

Cutting down an enemy Ascended, Sunny jumped back and sucked in a hoarse breath.

'Damnation…'

Something had to change.

Chapter-1190: Battle of the Black Skull (4)

It was growing near, the moment Sunny feared.

He did not really care if Valor won or lost. All he cared about was making sure that there were enough Awakened left alive in the aftermath of the battle to continue defending the siege capitals across Antarctica until the winter solstice.

But for that, he needed Clan Song to be defeated in a swift and decisive fashion. Which didn't seem to be possible anymore… in fact, from what he saw, the most probable result of the battle was the one he had wanted to avoid at all costs— mutual destruction.

The forces of Song were going to win, but the closer they came to victory, the more furiously the warriors of Valor would fight. In the end, it was going to be a massacre.

…Unless Morgan had something planned.

But what could it be?

'Damn it, damn it…'

Sunny could think of only one way to quickly break the tide of the battle — eliminate Beastmaster. But the alluring Saint was hidden from his sight, and so, he couldn't even attempt to attack her.

In the absence of the real target, there was a secondary goal he wanted to achieve. It was not something that his calculating mind had deemed the most beneficial in the current situation, but simply something he desired.

Sunny did not want to see Saint Tyris die.

So, he was intending to help her. Maybe that would force Beastmaster to keep suppressing Sky Tide without switching to other targets, as well…

Currently, Sunny was in the very thick of the furious melee between the two armies. There were swords flashing and blood spilling on all sides, the terrible cacophony of the battle assaulting his ears at the same time as the vile ugliness of it all assaulted his eyes.

Numerous Aspects were turning the somber Antarctic plain into a feverish nightmare, and the overcast sky was on the verge of unleashing a heavy rain.

In front of him, an Ascended of Clan Song easily cut down a valiant Awakened of Clan Valor. He had noticed her a long time ago as she moved across the battlefield, leaving a trail of blood and death in her wake.

The woman's Aspect seemed to do with manipulating blood — a stream of it spiraled around her like a scarlet ribbon, sometimes shooting forward to pierce the heavy armor of her enemies as if it was paper.

Their eyes met for a moment, and then, the Ascended lunged into an attack.

Sunny was faster.

He easily dodged the scarlet ribbon, dashed forward, and deflected her sword. A split second later, the blade of the Sin of Solace passed through the woman's neck.

[You have slain an Ascended human…]

'Waste…'

In the same motion, Sunny battered an abomination's claw to the side, thus saving the life of an Awakened soldier, and grabbed the creature by the neck. It shattered in his grip, and before the pale soldier could react, he was already moving past.

[You have slain a Fallen...]

Not a moment later, the Awakened was killed by an enchanted arrow that slid into the visor of his helmet.

'Waste…'

There were the remains of a cohort of Song warriors trying to bar his way — three of them, all covered in blood and with wild looks on their faces.

Shadows rose from the ground, grabbing at their ankles. The Sin of Solace flashed three times, and three heads rolled down.

'Such a damned waste!'

Sunny cut through the battlefield, moving with terrible speed. He killed anyone who could slow him, and evaded everyone else. Nevertheless, the shadow he had sent forward was much faster — it reached Saint Tyris long before he could.

Sunny used Shadow Step to appear near Sky Tide instantly, and not a moment too soon. She was completely surrounded by enemies, cutting them down with her sword. Even though Tyris had been denied her Transcendent form, and even though she was continuously withstanding a ruinous mental assault, she was still a Saint — her physical prowess, skill, and judgment were beyond the realm of ordinary humans.

However, even she had a limit.

Sunny deflected a sword aimed at her back and used the rebound force to spin and deliver a crushing kick to the abdomen of the attacking Master. Usually, it would have been stupid to show his back to the enemy, but right now, they were surrounded from all sides — no matter how Sunny turned, he would be exposed.

Additionally, such logic only applied to humans who did not have eyes at the back of their heads. He, however, had shadow sense, and could look upon the world through his shadows as well.

Sunny did not have blind spots, and he also did not have common weaknesses.

He could even fight with his eyes closed, if he wished to, while his skin was hard enough to resist most attacks below a certain level.

…Which didn't mean that he was invincible, of course.

In fact, as soon as he reached Saint Tyris, he was overwhelmed by a sudden feeling of dread. Sunny did not know the reason for it, but it was as though… as though something inconceivably vast and powerful was looking at him, full of inhuman indifference.

No, not indifference… emptiness.

'What… what is this feeling?'

Sunny was distracted for a split second, which gave the enemies an opportunity to launch an attack on him.

From below, the ground suddenly shifted and rose, wrapping around his legs — just like the shadows he had used a dozen seconds ago to immobilize the three Awakened.

At the same time, a javelin made of turbulent wind shot at his head.

Sunny cursed, then sent essence into his legs to give them some explosive strength, broke through the bindings, and bent backwards to dodge the javelin.

As a result, he avoided the attack, but ended up rolling over his shoulder.

When he hit the ground, though, it felt… wrong.

'What the hell?'

Sunny felt something cold and slithering move across his palm. Looking down, he saw a thin, grey worm crawling across it, with pieces of soil sticking to its translucent body.

The sight of it was naturally disgusting, but more than that, it suddenly filled Sunny with fear.

He gazed at the spot that he had touched to exit the roll and

shivered.

The soil… was moving, countless worms crawling out of it like flesh maggots.

It was not just that small patch of ground, either.

All around them, the battlefield seemed to be… rippling. The ground was seething like a liquid, full of these thin, grey worms…

Suddenly, Sunny felt very cold.

His mind froze for a brief moment.

It could have been a manifestation of a powerful Aspect Ability… but the scale of it was too great to come from anyone except for a Saint.

There were no Saints with these kinds of powers on the battlefield, though.

His eyes widened.

'The… the... the Titan?'

Chapter-1191: Battle of the Black Skull (5)

The Nightmare Gate leading to the area of the Black Skull Citadel was located within the hunting grounds of a Corrupted Titan… Sunny knew that.

The titan itself was a mysterious creature. The Evacuation Army did not possess a lot of information about it, simply because it was too dangerous of a task to observe the abomination — after losing several teams while trying to investigate the creature, even the elite scouts of the Special Reconnaissance Unit did not dare stalk it.

All they knew about the Corrupted Titan was that its movement patterns were erratic, that approaching it was suicidal, and that its powers had something to do with reanimating the dead. As long as the creature showed no sign of setting its sights on one of the siege capitals, the army simply monitored its general area of activity and kept away.

Army Command had also taken steps to ensure that the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures slain around the siege capitals were promptly disposed of, to ensure that the titan wouldn't be able to make use of them.

…However, the forces of the warring clans had brazenly invaded its territory, and now, they were about to pay the price. Sunny was sure of it.

'Damnation…'

Staring at the worm crawling across his palm, he felt time slow down. Instantly, Sunny was overwhelmed by an animalistic, panicked desire to sever his hand before it was too late — he did not know what would happen if he didn't, and was terrified to find out.

He was… scared.

There had been a time when Sunny felt fear often. At some point, however, he had developed a pretty high tolerance to terror, maybe because he had been exposed to it too much. These days, he sometimes felt disturbed, apprehensive, and wary — but very rarely truly afraid.

He couldn't help but be afraid now, though. Looking at the grey worm, it was as though Sunny had been transported to a snowy field in the Antarctic Center. The feeling of absolute, overwhelming powerlessness he had experienced there… it chilled him to the bone.

'Curse it!'

With a snarl, Sunny dissolved into the shadows, allowing the worm to fall to the ground. A split second later, he reappeared a few meters away, holding his sword in a defensive stance.

All around, the battlefield was changing. The worms were crawling from the ground and… and burrowing into the corpses of the fallen Awakened and slain Nightmare Creatures.

Moments later, the corpses started to convulse. Some were even rising, moving like broken marionettes.

'What.. what is this?'

Horrified, Sunny watched as the victims of the bloody battle were being brought back to life… or rather, to a perverted semblance of life. All kinds of wild thoughts flashed through his mind, from the instinctual desire to flee to the wild idea that it was Ki Song, the Queen of Worms, had personally descending into the waking world.

But no, it couldn't be her…

It was simply a Corrupted Titan — it had to be. A creature like that was powerful, but not indestructible. Sky Tide alone had battled the Winter Beast for weeks… months, even. If there had been six more Saints supporting her, the abominable creature would have undoubtedly been slain.

There were currently seven Saints present on the battlefield — six belonging to the great clans, and Wake of Ruin. There were Sunny, Nephis, Morgan, Mordret, and Seishan as well. There was no reason for him to…

Suddenly, the ground trembled and split. Hundreds of meters away, a gargantuan head rose from below it — the head of a revolting, giant worm. It crawled from the soil as if escaping hell, its long body not really a single whole, but instead a shape created by numerous slithering grey worms sticking together. A visage so ghastly that Sunny suddenly wanted to vomit.

However, he didn't. Because there were things only Sunny could see…

Even though the giant body of the titan was not an actual creature, but instead an amalgamation of countless smaller worms, he could see its soul cores. A scattering of radiant embers that continued to reveal themselves as the abominations crawled from underground. Three were already in view, and four more would undoubtedly follow.

Sunny felt something move in his chest, and allowed himself to be paralyzed by shock.

But only for a second.

'Embers… embers… seven embers…'

His eyes widened. Sunny was frozen for a moment, and then whispered:

"All there is to war is power... and application of power... one has to be flexible when waging war..."

I have them exactly where I wanted them.

That was what Morgan had said.

He shivered.

'Of course…'

A Corrupted Titan would have had seven soul cores… seven corrupted soul cores. Its soul would have been permeated with abhorrent darkness stemming from seven vile nodes.

A Transcendent Titan, if such a thing existed, would have had seven radiant spheres of light serving as the nexuses of its vast soul.

The creature in front of him, however, had neither nodes of darkness nor radiant cores. Instead, it had seven bright embers burning within its body.

Like a Transcendent Echo would.

And Morgan had summoned twenty of those, already.

For some reason, the Spell was obsessed with the number seven. And, influenced by the Spell, humans had begun to structure various things in sevens, as well.

So, wouldn't the princess of Valor actually possess twenty-one Transcendent Echoes?

That would be only logical…

Finally, several things clicked together in Sunny's mind — the reason for Morgan's unexplainable confidence, her pretense of willingness to participate in a duel that had pushed Beastmaster into committing to a battle, the fact that the Corrupted Titan's hunting grounds had shifted to encompass the Black Skull Nightmare Gate right after reinforcements had been sent through it by Whispering Blade…

Sunny blinked.

'...What a devious strategy.'

There wasn't, and had never been, a Corrupted Titan. There was only an Echo of one — a Transcendent Echo belonging to Morgan. She had unleashed it in East Antarctica and allowed it to roam free all that time. The Echo had even destroyed several human outposts and killed every scout of the Evacuation Army sent to investigate it, until no more scouts were sent.

All to make this moment possible.

The titan Echo had been supposed to protect the Nightmare Gate and seal access to Black Skull until it was captured by Clan Valor, but Mordret bypassed the worm entirely and made those plans useless. So, Morgan was forced to shift her strategy.

Instead of betting on the Black Skull Citadel to carry her to the Tomb of Ariel ahead of the competition, she used it as a lure to decimate Clan Song's forces on the battlefield.

She had applied her power in a way most flexible, indeed.

…Looking at the giant grey worm rising from the ground, Sunny suppressed a stifled laugh.

'What the hell… am I supposed… to be happy to see this revolting thing?'

Chapter-1192: Battle of the Black Skull (6)

Before the battle, Morgan had said that she would have been certain of Valor's victory if not for Mordret's Reflections.

Now that her final Echo had revealed itself, Sunny finally understood what she meant.

The arrival of the worm titan instantly changed the situation on the battlefield, but even such a creature was not enough to spell certain defeat for the forces of Clan Song.

...A mere Corrupted Titan would not have been able to doom the monstrous beings gathered on the desolate Antarctic plain today, and an Echo of one was tremendously powerful, but not nearly as dreadful as the real thing would have been.

So, even though the situation had changed, the outcome of the battle still hung in fragile balance.

The dead were rising to assist the outnumbered warriors of Valor. The main body of the Echo itself had to be dealt with, as well.

Instead of quelling the furious bloodshed, the arrival of the abominable worm only seemed to drive the chaos to a new, inconceivable level.

One thing it did manage to achieve instantly, though, was force Beastmaster to finally reveal herself.

Sunny felt her presence before he saw her.

It was as though an invisible hammer fell from the sky, pressing every soldier of Clan Valor into the ground. The Awakened, who had

been fighting with indomitable resolve up until now, suddenly staggered and swayed. Their movements grew sluggish and strained.

'Aargh…'

Sunny gritted his teeth as he shook off the effects of the mental assault . Even his incredible resistance against mind attacks had been insufficient to fully deflect Beastmaster's diabolical power… the poor warriors of Clan Valor stood no chance against it.

Their only saving grace was that the enchantress was forced to spread herself thin to influence a thousand powerful Awakened at the same time.

Their concentration was broken, and their strength was severely diminished, but at least they survived — if the task in front of the daughter of Ki Song had been less enormous, she would have probably managed to either subjugate them or outright shatter their minds.

The most frightening thing about it, though, was that the ordinary warriors were not even her main target.

Sunny saw it from the corner of his eye… but once he did, he couldn't look away.

Beastmaster appeared on the battlefield, standing calmly in front of the ravaged span of it where Whispering Blade had been fighting against the Reflections. Sunny did not know if she had used her Transformation Ability, but for some reason, the alluring Saint looked even more beautiful than she usually did… so much more...

Before, Beastmaster's beauty was mesmerizing. But now, it was simply ruinous.

She was so breathtaking that looking at her was actually painful.

It was as though Sunny's soul was bleeding.

'Damn it…'

As the beautiful demoness took a step forward, the four Reflections

that had been fighting Whispering Blade dashed away to confront the titanic worm.

Beastmaster did not wield any weapons, and her enemy could not be seen. The ground around her suddenly exploded, and she was obscured by a cloud of dust. Something moved within that cloud, and a devastating shockwave spread outward, sending Awakened warriors and enthralled Nightmare Creatures flying. A moment later, there was another explosion…

Sunny had entertained ideas of eliminating the demonic enchantress, but looking at her bizarre clash with Madoc — one using ethereal mental attacks, the other invisible swords — he was suddenly not sure that he was qualified. How was he supposed to intrude upon a battle that he could not even perceive?

'Later.'

For now, he still had an unfinished task.

The dead had risen to support the warriors of Valor, but Beastmaster's calamitous assault had restored the lethal equilibrium between the two fighting forces. The titanic Echo was clashing with the four Reflections…

And Saint Tyris was still in danger.

He dashed forward, using the Sin of Solace to cut down one of the Masters who had attacked him before — the one capable of creating javelins of compressed air.

The Spell whispered into his ear, and at the same time, the cursed sword laughed at him from the other side.

Ignoring both, Sunny fought his way through the ring of enemies surrounding Sky Tide and arrived at her side.

Saint Tyris was on one knee in the middle of a pile of corpses, her armor battered and broken. Her sword was covered in a net of cracks, and her golden hair was sticking to her face, painted red by blood. Nevertheless, her amber eyes were as calm and severe as always, full of grave resolve and unbreakable will.

…But they were full of pain and exhaustion, too.

She couldn't have been alright after bearing the brunt of Beastmaster's power for so long.

Sunny cursed and threw himself forward, colliding with a Corrupted thrall that was bringing down its stinger on Sky Tide's cracked sword. The two of them fell to the ground, and the Sin of Solace hissed, slicing through the abomination's tail.

There was no retaliation from the Nightmare Creature, because Saint Tyris had pierced its neck a split second later.

While Sunny was recovering, she pulled her sword out of the thrall's corpse and braced it to block an Aspect Ability attack made by one of Song's Ascended.

Sky Tide's sword let out a low ring, and shattered, instantly turning into a rain of radiant sparks. She was tossed back and grunted, spitting out a mouthful of blood.

'You bastards…'

Sunny was already back on his feet, full of dark fury.

He quickly assessed the situation and reluctantly suppressed his desire to slaughter everyone in sight. Cutting down the minions of Clan Song would have been enjoyable, but there were too many of them around, and they were too powerful — he could face them, and he could defend Saint Tyris. But he wasn't sure that he could do both at the same time.

For now, his priority was to ensure her safety.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny called upon the shadows. Instantly, a wave of darkness rose from his feet, pushing the enemies away and solidifying into a tall wall. That wall was not going to hold them back for long, but it would at least buy him some time.

He dashed toward Sky Tide and grabbed her by the shoulder, helping the Saint balance herself.

Her face was pale, and marred by blood.

"Lady Tyris! Are you alright?"

He knew that it was a stupid question to ask, considering the situation, but he still couldn't help but ask it.

She looked at him with a pained expression, and then, a pale smile appeared on her lips.

"I'll live. You should…"

Sky Tide did not finish the sentence. Sunny saw something reflecting in her eyes, and then, she suddenly pushed him away.

As Sunny flew back, he felt the wall of shadows he had created explode.

A split second later, monstrous claws tore through the spot he had been standing on. The ground shook from the terrible impact, and a vast cloud of dust rose into the air.

Those claws belonged to a towering creature that filled Sunny with a sense of dread.

The creature looked like an abominable hybrid between a human and a wolf. Even hunched, it was at least four meters tall, with terrifying fangs and bestial eyes that were full of wicked fury. The beast radiated a feeling of wildness, savage power, and primal ferocity.

Dire Fang had arrived to finish off the fallen Saint of the White Feather clan.

Chapter-1193: Battle of the Black Skull (7)

'Not good…'

Sunny landed in a roll and instantly dashed to the side. Almost at the same moment, claws tore through the air, almost brushing against his skin. They were so close that he felt the wind stirring as it threw his hair into disarray.

'Fast!'

Sunny landed on his feet and slid backwards. Sensing the movement of shadows, he raised the Sin of Solace to block the attack — not because he actually perceived it, but because he knew that it had to come.

Then, he screamed.

A deafening, inhuman, monstrous roar suddenly split the skies apart, and Sunny's head was instantly pierced by pain so intense that he couldn't help but to groan.

'What… what the hell is that, a sonic attack?'

As his vision blurred, the strike that he had predicted came. The Sin of Solace was in the way, but it was not in a position to form a solid block. Sunny's whole body shook as he was thrown back once again, his bones and tendons creaking under immense pressure.

Luckily, they did not burst apart.

But it really, really hurt…

Falling to the ground, Sunny dove into the shadows and flew out of

them a couple dozen meters away. He barely had time to grab Saint Tyris and carry her forward with his momentum before Dire Fang's claws tore into her battered armor.

The two of them came to a stop some distance away and froze for a moment, supporting each other. Sunny's breathing was hoarse, and Sky Tide's face was ashen.

In front of them, the towering monster — Saint Dire Fang, who had finally unleashed his transcendent power — slowly turned his wolf-like snout and looked at them with a bestial, bloodred, terrifying eye.

Sunny's intuition was screaming. Looking at the monstrous creature — half-human, half-beast — he felt it, deep in the dark expanse of his lightless soul.

Death.

Fighting Dire Fang meant death.

…A Saint was a Saint, after all.

In terms of raw power, a Transcendent human was similar to a Corrupted Nightmare Creature. Although humans possessed only one soul core, their intelligence and Aspect powers made them equal to Devils, at least — someone like Beastmaster seemed closer to a Terror, even.

Sunny had fought, and killed, many Corrupted abominations.

But despite the similarity, Saints were nothing like the creatures he had killed.

That had nothing to do with raw power, and everything to do with who they were.

Saints had to conquer five hells to Transcend — the First Nightmare, the Second Nightmare, the Third Nightmare… the Dream Realm, and the waking world. Countless humans had tried, but only the absolute best of the absolute best could survive all five of these impossible trials.

The strongest, the bravest, the smartest. The most determined, the most skilled, the most adaptable, the most lucky. By far. Only a person possessing all these qualities could become a Saint. Even with the interference of the great clans, nothing less would do.

So, facing a Saint was not comparable to facing a random Corrupted abomination.

Facing a Saint was like facing one of the strongest Corrupted abominations in existence.

A fiend among fiends.

Dire Fang was not alone, either. There were several Ascended of Clan Song and powerful thralls surrounding them, too.

'Curse it all…'

Sunny suppressed the desire to take a step back, knowing that they would not be able to run. His eyes grew dim and bleak.

He hesitated for a heartbeat, and then glanced at Sky Tide.

If he went all-out, using Shadow Shell and every other trick at his disposal… it would probably still not be enough.

His last desperate gamble was the Mirror of Truth, but Sunny was not sure that it would be of any help — not before both of them were torn apart by Dire Fang, at least.

He trembled.

"Lady Tyris, I… I don't know what to do."

She looked at him, her bloodied face remaining calm and composed. Her voice was steady, too…

"Of course, you do. You have to flee."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

Yes, retreat was always an option… he was a great master of staying

alive, after all. He could dissolve into shadows and emerge from them hundreds of meters, or even a few kilometers away from the dreadful Saint. He could become one of the shadows, as well, and thus immune to all physical damage.

That was how he had survived on that snowy field in the Antarctic Center, after all.

The problem was that he couldn't take anyone with him.

And so, Sky Tide's meaning was clear — she was telling him to leave her and save himself.

But Sunny… he…

Didn't want to.

And so, he was not going to.

There was no time for conversations, really, so he simply raised his sword and snarled:

"Like hell I will!"

In the next moment, the monstrous figure of Dire Fang turned into a grey blur. He was moving too fast for Sunny to trace where the attack would come from… even shadow sense could not keep up with the bestial Saint… and so, all Sunny could do was guess.

'Crap.'

He summoned the shadows again, trying to build another wall around them. However, it was smashed apart before receiving the chance to solidify.

He tried to block the attack of the Transcendent with the Sin of Solace again. However, it was pushed aside with disheartening ease.

He put himself between Dire Fang and Saint Tyris.

'Argh!'

Sunny felt his throat being ripped open by a sharp claw. He reeled back and grabbed his mutilated neck, feeling blood flow through his fingers like a river.

'That… damn it… that hurts…'

He used the Dying Wish to heal the lethal wound, exhausting the accumulated charge of the Transcendent charm.

It was still not enough to change the situation. The monstrous beast was already lunging to deliver another attack, and this time…

Before Sunny could react, a blinding flash suddenly illuminated the world, and the grey blur lunging at them was suddenly swallowed by an explosion of white flames.

At the same time, a figure wielding a slender rapier appeared in front of the Ascended of Clan Song. She moved between them like an apparition, deflecting a rain of attacks with measured elegance and strange, seemingly irrational ease.

Cassie pulled the attention of the enemy Masters and thralls, while Nephis positioned herself between Dire Fang and Sunny.

The towering beast emerged from the flames — wisps of white fire were dancing on his fur, but he did not appear burned. The Saint bared his fangs in a murderous grin.

Looking up at the towering monstrosity, Nephis calmly brought her radiant longsword into a high guard.

"Sunny… are you alright?"

He sighed.

'Damn… it is indeed a stupid question to ask…'

Chapter-1194: Battle of the Black Skull (8)

Sunny let out a terse breath.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just got my throat ripped out… no big deal…"

He lowered his bloodied hand, revealing the wound that had already disappeared thanks to the [Death Wish] enchantment. There was a lot of blood on his neck and the black silk of the Shroud of Dusk, but under it, his skin and flesh were perfectly fine.

A corner of Neph's mouth curled upward.

"I see."

Then, she looked at Dire Fang with a severity that seemed cold enough to freeze a person to death and said calmly:

"In that case… Lady Sky Tide, please fall back with Song of the Fallen. Master Sunless and I will remain to cover your retreat."

Saint Tyris was in no condition to face Dire Fang in battle. Even if she wanted to stay, her presence would only slow the two of them down… she seemed to have understood that, as well.

Even if she didn't, Sunny was not sure that Sky Tide was in a position to refuse Neph's orders — she was a vassal of Clan Valor, after all, and Nephis was technically of the same status as Morgan.

"Cassie, take her!"

There was nowhere really safe on the battlefield, but getting closer to the main body of Valor's force — and away from the most dangerous enemies — would increase Sky Tide's chances of survival by a lot.

Cassie was facing two Masters of Clan Song. Her rapier did not seem to move very swiftly, but somehow, it was always where it needed to be to deflect their attacks. The blind girl moved with measured cadence, always half a step ahead of her enemies. Although her face remained calm, the two Ascended seemed… shaken.

Shaken enough to make a mistake.

Just at that moment, one of them summoned his Aspect Ability to turn the ground under Cassie's feet into treacherous mud, while the other committed to a powerful thrust of his sword.

However, the blind girl lightly jumped just a split second before her footing would have been lost in wet sludge, avoiding being momentarily immobilized. Her rapier shot forward, piercing the neck of the swordsman who had been counting on his partner's Aspect to stall the enemy.

At the same time, something flashed through the air, and the Quiet Dancer came to a halt above her shoulder, its blade marred by blood.

Both Masters silently fell down.

Their bodies crumbled to the ground almost at the same exact moment as Cassie landed from her jump, one rapier in hand and another hovering above her shoulder.

She swiftly moved, evading a frenzied attack of a Corrupted thrall, and appeared next to Saint Tyris. Without saying a word, the blind girl grabbed Sky Tide by the shoulder and pulled her away.

…Dire Fang, surprisingly, allowed all of that to happen without moving a muscle. He simply stared at Nephis from above as the white flames died down on his fur, motionless, with an indifferent expression on his bestial face.

Sunny was curious about what the gloomy Saint was thinking, but at the same time, he didn't really care to know.

Soon enough, the three of them were left facing each other — the towering monstrosity on one side, Sunny and Nephis standing shoulder to shoulder on the other.

'Ah… it brings back memories.'

The situation was entirely different, and the enemy was entirely different… the two of them were entirely different, as well. So much had changed, and yet, he couldn't help but feel as if they were back under the branches of the Soul Devourer, looking up at the Carapace Demon and preparing to bring the enormous abomination down.

Dire Fang's snout moved, and suddenly, a deep, reverberating voice escaped from it, making Sunny's bones tremble:

"You are… Broken Sword's daughter…"

Nephis tilted her head a little, then answered calmly:

"I am."

Red sparks swirled around her head, forming into a helmet.

The monstrous beast grinned.

"Shame…"

With that, he roared and lunged forward.

***

Somewhere else on the battlefield, piles of corpses were moving, coming back to life. Constant shockwaves from the distant clash between the titan Echo and the four Reflections were shaking the ground, making it seem as if the world was on the verge of crumbling to dust.

There were Awakened, Echoes, and enthralled abominations tearing each other apart. The soil was soaked with blood, and more bodies fell into the red sludge every moment.

A bolt of lightning flashed, and a thunderclap rolled across the desolate plain, soon drowning in the clangor of the battle.

The first drops of heavy rain fell down.

In the midst of all this chaos, covered in blood, a young man in battered armor coldly pulled his sword from the body of an Awakened warrior, threw the corpse aside, and turned around.

A slender young woman clad in a suit of black armor, with a red cape draped around her shoulders, reflected in his strange, mirror-like eyes.

The two of them looked so much alike that they could be mistaken for twins.

Morgan calmly dismissed her cape, allowing it to disintegrate into a rain of scarlet sparks. Raising her sword and pointing it at Mordret, she pierced him with a sharp gaze and smiled:

"Let's get it over with, monster. Play whatever dirty tricks you have left, and then we can settle it once and for all with our swords."

Mordret stared at her for a moment, then glanced at the distant shape of the gargantuan worm.

"...Dirty tricks, huh? Ah, but I don't have any of those left."

His sister smirked with contempt.

"Please forgive me if I don't believe you."

Mordret shook his head and took a step forward, his face devoid of the usual lightness.

"Don't get me wrong… I could have prepared a few. But that would be so unsatisfying, don't you think? Dear sister… you shouldn't assume that I want to kill you with my own two hands any less than you want to kill me. What's the point of killing you with a trick? Then, you'll just die thinking — there he goes, doing something contemptible again.

No, no, no… I want to kill you, all of you, with what you pride yourself on most. I want to crush you all."

Morgan grinned.

"So, what? You are really going to fight me with a sword? Have you lost the last bits of your broken mind, creature? You don't stand a chance."

Mordret took another step back and gritted his teeth.

"...We'll see."

His usually calm voice was suddenly distorted by a vast, dark, incinerating hatred.

A hatred so hot it could melt the abyss.

Morgan stopped smiling and walked toward him with a calm expression.

"Do you still think that you can escape? I'll have to disappoint you… when this body of yours is destroyed, there will be no escape. You have already spent… what was it, six, seven years?... locked in a box. This time, we've built a better one. This time, you'll stay locked forever."

Finally, a mad smile appeared on Mordret's face.

"We'll see about that, too…"

A split second later, the clangor of two clashing swords drowned out the cacophony of the battle.

***

Somewhere else on the battlefield, a taciturn Shadow was fighting a blindingly radiant Reflection. And somewhere else, the legendary Whispering Blade was fighting the beautiful demoness, Beastmaster.

A giant Black Panther was tearing a figure woven out of sunlight into shreds with her claws. Her Reflection was furiously trying to shake off a small figure of black steel from its hide, while the small figure stubbornly held on.

Soul Reaper Jet had aimed her glaive at a monstrous visage of Song Seishan, her leather armor riddled with holes. The monster facing her

wiped the blood off her lips and spat, as if tasting something disgusting.

A blind girl was fighting through a mass of enthralled Nightmare Creatures to guide a battered Saint to safety.

A revolting creature made out of countless grey worms was being slowly destroyed by four cracked Reflections.

As the grey sky broke with a torrent of rain, the ruinous battle exploded into a nightmare of violence.

Chapter-1195: Battle of the Black Skull (9)

The world had grown darker under the veil of tumultuous thunderclouds, and torrents of water fell from the skies, bending like whips. Illuminated by a blinding flash of lightning, two humans dashed away from the claws of a towering beast.

"Nephis, now!"

There was no real need for words. Sunny and Nephis might have grown distant as of late due to the choices they had made, but the core of their relationship was the same. They were battle partners first, and everything else second — that bond had been forged in fire, tears, and blood on the Forgotten Shore long before a shadow was cast on it by other matters.

By now, their ability to act with seamless coordination was even higher than the unnatural unity granted to the warriors of Valor by the forged swords.

From the moment that the two of them had killed that first Carapace Scavenger together, Sunny and Nephis went through countless battles together. She had taught him how to wield the sword, while he taught her how to control her soul essence as a Master.

Despite everything, that bond would never change.

…Which was not to say that there was no other bond between them.

The moment Dire Fang lunged forward, Sunny dashed to the right, while Nephis dashed to the left. At the same time, some of her radiance mixed with his shadows, while one of his shadows wrapped itself around her body.

The sum of their powers was greater than its parts.

The shadows and the brilliant light seemed to resonate with each other, making both of them stronger than they had any right to be. Sunny turned into a silhouette shrouded in broiling darkness, while Neph's radiance took on a darker hue. The darkness was permeated with blinding white light, while the light seemed to contain wisps of inexhaustible darkness.

The light made the darkness deeper, while the darkness made the light much more stark and radiant.

And there was more to it, too.

At least for Sunny. Unlike his shadows, which augmented all his physical attributes, Neph's flames ignited the soul, too. Wreathed in her fire, he could feel his essence become much more vibrant and warm.

Much more potent.

'Ah… what a nice feeling…'

Nephis must have been using her full augmentation, and with the addition of Sunny's shadow, she was just fast enough to evade Dire Fang's claws.

He, on the other hand, was just a little bit slower… luckily, the Saint had chosen Changing Star as the primary target. Since he couldn't attack both of them at the same time effectively, the strike directed at Sunny was not as inescapable as it could have been.

Sunny felt a slight sense of dissatisfaction.

'So, what, we are back to that? Neph is the bait, while I am the blade?'

He didn't like it one bit.

In any case… Dire Fang had made a mistake. A very serious mistake.

He shouldn't have paid less attention to Sunny.

Because while his soul was aflame with Neph's radiance, a few of his abilities received a transformative boost, as well. Not the least because he could spend his essence more freely.

'Get ready, bastard…'

Nephis landed from her dodge and instantly pivoted, barely avoiding the beast's follow-up strike and slashing at his arm with her incandescent sword.

At the same time, Sunny allowed himself to be buried under a wave of shadows.

What emerged from them, however, was not a human, but a four-armed fiend clad in a suit of fearsome onyx armor. The creature was like a spawn of darkness, but its eyes burned with furious white radiance, and its mouth was like an incinerating furnace of white flame.

The two of them had created distance between each other, and so, Dire Fang could only face one at a time.

That was why he was a fraction of a moment too late to react to Sunny's attack.

'Faster. Faster. Faster!'

The ground split and exploded under his clawed foot as Sunny pushed himself forward. The air, which was usually soft and unnoticeable, was suddenly like a wall… he broke through that wall. The drops of rain seemed to freeze in place as they fell.

Sunny wanted to let out a scream, a roar, a battle cry…

But he didn't, of course.

Why would he announce his strike while attacking the enemy from behind?

The Sin of Solace fell silently.

But Dire Fang was suddenly not in the place he had been a split

second before.

The towering beast had twisted, somehow, to avoid the Transcendent blade — too swift to be seen. Sunny only felt the air being displaced by the Saint's massive body a heartbeat later.

That was fine, too.

He fell down, crouching on his four hands, and felt something tear through the empty space above.

In the next moment, there was a blinding flash, and an angry growl.

Dire Fang might have been able to avoid Sunny's attempt at backstabbing him, but by doing so, he was forced to turn his back on Nephis.

And Nephis, without wasting a single moment, used this chance to plunge her incandescent sword into the beast's hide.

The towering creature disengaged and stopped for a moment, looking down. There, on its flank, a long wound could be seen through singed fur. Drops of blood were rolling down his side as they boiled.

The laceration was shallow, and not at all serious.

However…

Dire Fang had received a wound, no matter how small, while Sunny and Nephis had not.

His bestial face contorted into a vicious snarl.

The Saint did not say anything before launching into another attack.

There was no need for words, and none of them had anything to say.

Their swords, claws, and Aspects would be doing the talking.

A spirit of flame, a spawn of shadows, and a savage beast clashed in the middle of a terrifying battlefield. They were moving so fast that it was hard to see what was happening. Flowers of white fire bloomed

in the middle of a pouring rain, and the ground shook from the fury of their murderous clash.

Their battle was frenzied and turned everything around them into pure havoc, but it wasn't senseless. In fact, each of the three remained chillingly cold-blooded and calculating in the midst of the furious confrontation.

Even while augmenting each other, Sunny and Nephis were much slower and weaker than the Saint of Clan Song… but not to the degree where he could instantly annihilate them.

More importantly than that, there were two of them. Even if they were not Dire Fang's equals in terms of raw power, they could use their knowledge and understanding of each other to make up for the gap in strength.

And so, the battle raged on.

Scores of strikes were exchanged in the span of a dozen seconds. The ground was broken and upturned. The rainwater mixed with the soil, turning it into mud. The mud was incinerated by the flames, turning into ash.

For a few short moments, a fragile equilibrium seemed to have been created between the two Masters and the Saint.

Astonishingly, Sunny and Nephis had not been ripped to pieces by Dire Fang, like a couple of Ascended should have been.

They even managed to push him back.

But Sunny was not very happy about the result…

It was because he knew that this equilibrium would not last long.

Right now, even while fighting at the absolute limit of their capabilities, both sides were carefully studying their adversary.

The side that managed to glean the enemy's strengths and weaknesses first was going to win, while the side that failed was going to be killed.

'Well, how wonderful…'

…In that regard, Sunny had an overwhelming advantage.

As a practitioner of Shadow Dance, he was unrivaled when it came to learning everything about his enemies, be they humans, Nightmare Creatures, or Saints...

Chapter-1196: Battle of the Black Skull (10)

In the cacophony of the battle, obscured by roaring thunderclaps and the whisper of falling rain, two swords were creating a lethal melody of steel.

Mordret knew that he was weaker than his younger sister. He was slower, too, and not nearly as resilient. He was even less skilled, perhaps.

His powers were formidable, but they were useless against her. The King of Swords had made sure of that. His soul cores had been spent on creating the Reflections, and those Reflections were being spent on holding back her army.

That army was also more powerful than the one on his side. Morgan had chosen the battlefield and lured the enemy into a trap. As a general, she had already succeeded.

But she was not only a cunning strategist. She was a brilliant warrior, too.

Morgan was like an unstoppable blade. She had everything that a Princess of War was supposed to possess. She had power, talent, resolve, intelligence… she had the authority of their family, and its favor as well.

While Mordret had nothing. He had always had nothing.

And everything he had tried to make his was either destroyed or taken away.

However, despite all that…

He was not going to lose.

He was going to win.

"Die, you wretched thing!"

Their swords clashed, and even though Mordret had managed to read her intentions, he was still thrown back. His block was perfect, but it was not strong enough. He slid in the mud and let out a pained gasp.

He was slightly dazed.

Rain was falling all around them like a grey wall, and every drop was a mirror. The world was reflected on itself myriads of times, and all those reflected worlds flooded his mind like a kaleidoscope of horror.

Every gruesome death, every desperate call for help, every selfless act of courage, every cowardly wail of defeat were reflected, multiplied, and projected into his head.

It helped him to orient himself better on the chaotic battlefield, but it was also…

'Ah. Annoying.'

This was why he didn't like rain.

Morgan was already closing in. Mordret grinned as he rose to face her.

There she was. A beautiful young woman in a suit of black armor, who looked so much like him.

What did she know? She didn't know anything. She had been a mere child when their family decided to betray him. Not even a Sleeper. She had not been there when his original body was destroyed, or when he was locked in a cage like a beast…

Morgan was not among those he wanted to kill the most.

But she was their symbol.

For Mordret, the young woman with a face that was eerily similar to his own symbolized the great clan Valor. She embodied everything that he wanted to destroy.

And, so…

He was going to break her into pieces.

Her sword flashed, cleanly cutting through the raindrops as it flew toward his body. He tried to deflect it, but it was of no use — the strike turned out to be a feint. A moment later, sharp pain pierced the left side of his face.

Mordret stumbled back, feeling blood flow down his cheek.

'Argh… I… I think I lost an eye, this time…'

Illuminated by the flash of lightning, Morgan's face remained impassive.

"Pathetic."

Did her voice sound… disappointed?

Mordret smiled and raised his sword without saying anything.

Usually, this would be the time to implement a scheme… a cunning trick, a subtle deception, an unexpected reversal… something like that. He was a master of such things, after all.

But he was sincere when he said that there would be no tricks today. There was no point in destroying the symbol of Valor with a trick… there would be no satisfaction, either.

His hatred would not be quenched.

No… he was going to defeat her with nothing except his own body and blade.

Because, even after they had discarded him… Mordret was still stronger, strong enough to destroy them all.

And they needed to learn that.

"Come, sister. Give it your all!"

His laughter drowned in the rain.

Morgan obliged.

For a few seconds, the two of them clashed, their swords singing a sharp and deadly song. The clangor of two blades striking against each other fused into one continuous, sonorous melody. They were too fast, too skilled. Neither could overpower the other, and those who got in their way could only flee and stare in terror and awe.

But eventually, inevitably, Morgan obliterated his defenses.

Her sword broke through his armor, impaling him through the chest. If it was anyone else, their heart would have been pierced… oh, but he must have shaken her a fair bit. Enough for her to forget that her brother had been born with a rare condition that caused the position of one's organs to be reversed.

So, she missed his heart.

Still… having a sword driven through your lung hurt a lot. It hurt terribly.

Not that he cared.

Instead of recoiling from the strike, Mordret pushed forward and grabbed Morgan by the neck. Her eyes widened, and she hurriedly tried to twist the sword in the wound.

Her other arm was already moving to block the potential strike of his own sword.

Instead of trying to use it, Mordret simply headbutted her and felt her nose crack under the force of the unexpected blow.

Morgan staggered back.

Blood was flowing from her broken nose, painting the lower part of

her face red.

"You vile… scum…"

Her sword, which was still lodged in his chest, scattered into a whirlwind of scarlet sparks. He couldn't help but stagger and let out a pained yelp.

She was, without a doubt, going to summon it back… but that would take a few seconds, at least…

Not caring, Morgan lunged forward. Her leg whipped into the air, aiming to take his head clean off. Mordret blocked it with his sword, and felt his sword crack.

His sword broke.

There was more pain.

Morgan's shin cut through his sword, his armor, and his forearm. The bone broke, the muscles split, and the tendons tore.

His bleeding hand fell to the ground.

Not paying it any attention, Mordret stepped forward and drove his broken sword into the narrow crack between her breastplate and the segmented steel skirt protecting her lower waist. The jagged blade plunged into his sister's side… even though her flesh seemed as durable as steel, he pushed it as deep as he could before the broken Memory disintegrated into a rain of sparks.

She let out a stifled groan and pushed herself away.

"I'll… kill you…"

She tried to hide it, but there was a hint of hesitation in her voice.

Morgan was winning… she was definitely winning. She had only received one serious wound, while her enemy already looked half-dead. He looked like a walking corpse.

So why… why was he so calm? What was wrong with him?

She felt a chill run down her spine.

…Her sword was already manifesting itself back into reality.

Mordret was summoning a new weapon, as well.

He glanced down, at his severed hand, and stepped over it indifferently.

"No. You won't."

There was a hint of finality to his words.

Gritting her teeth, Morgan blocked out the pain and attacked once again.

Chapter-1197: Battle of the Black Skull (11)

A booming thunderclap shook the world… but the bestial roar that tore through the clangor of the battlefield was much more deafening. It rolled across the ravaged land like a physical force, sapping the strength of the warriors and making them sway.

…Sunny, who was very close to the source of that roar, cursed under his breath as he pushed the pain aside and twisted his body to avoid being sliced by the monstrous claws of the rampaging Saint.

Dire Fang's hand flew past him, and while Sunny was trying to bring the Sin of Solace down on the creature's monstrous limb, Nephis attacked from the other side, her sword turning the whipping streams of rain into boiling vapor.

The two of them were like hunters fighting against a powerful beast. They circled around him and used their cooperation to make up for the gap in power, acting with the cunning and foresight that made humans so deadly.

Nephis was fighting in a way that would have made all the other Ascended freeze in stunned silence. She was just too fast, too strong, and too destructive. Her incandescent sword was hot and sharp enough to incinerate the world, and her skill and battle sense seemed to transcend the concept of limits.

Sunny was no less frightening. Hidden in the tenebrous embrace of the Shadow Shell, he fought with the ferocious power of a trueborn fiend and used his inhuman physique to move in a way that no human could repeat, and no opponent could predict.

Much more importantly, despite the stark difference between the two of them — one shrouded in burning darkness, the other suffused with

beautiful light — they fought and acted as one.

That combination was too lethal for a mere beast to survive.

…However, their enemy was not a beast, no matter how animalistic his form appeared.

Dire Fang's Transformation Ability allowed him to become a strange hybrid between a wolf and a man. His claws, his fangs, his bestial eyes, his thick fur… as well as his inhuman rage, his savage bloodlust, and his primal might — all of it made Sunny feel as though he was fighting a Nightmare Creature.

But the Saint was not a Nightmare Creature. Behind all these monstrous traits hid the cold, calculating mind of a human. And, as a human, he had benefited from the vast legacy of accumulated knowledge and insight that all humans were the inheritors of.

In other words, Dire Fang possessed the body of a powerful abomination, but fought with the sublime skill of a gifted human warrior.

Because of the nature of his Transformation, the Saint was using a strange mix of a hand-to-hand martial art and a knife-fighting technique — only, in his case, sharp claws were playing the role of the knives, and he had twenty of them. He had a maw full of terrifying fangs, as well.

And the level of skill this Transcendent possessed — or any Transcendent, really — was truly stunning. Sunny was not sure if he had ever faced an enemy with such mastery over their weapons of choice. If he did, they could probably be counted on one hand.

In any case, despite the best efforts of Sunny and Nephis, they simply couldn't bring the Saint down.

They couldn't even seriously wound him, really.

They were barely managing to stay alive.

There were several cuts on the massive beast's body, but the two of them had received much more damage than Dire Fang. Both of their

armors were battered and dented, and Sunny could taste blood on his tongue.

Feeling a hint of despair crawl its way into his heart, he gritted his teeth and dashed forward to capitalize on the small window of opportunity Nephis had created and deliver a vicious blow.

The attack missed.

'He's… a monster…'

A moment later, his body shook as it was batted away by an unexpected, but perfectly executed elbow strike. The breastplate of the Mantle dented and almost cracked.

Nephis launched into a reckless attack in order to buy him a little time to recover.

She was going to pay for it, without a doubt, but at this point, their battle was not about remaining unscathed.

It was about being a little bit less broken than the enemy at the end of it.

'Argh!'

Dire Fang was powerful, Dire Fang was skilled, and worst of all, Dire Fang was strange. His battle style was too unique, too bizarre, and too deep to be deciphered in a short amount of time. It had been perfectly tailored for his monstrous Transcendent form, with its contradictory physical traits and attributes, which were both human and not.

He displayed a level of essence control so intricate, deliberate, and ingeniously applied that it made Sunny question his own talent… no, it was not a question of talent. It was simply the innate superiority of a higher Rank multiplied by the amount of effort put into integrating essence into a combat style, both by Dire Fang himself and many battle masters of Clan Song.

It was the benefit of being a vassal of a great clan.

…This was possibly the first dedicated essence technique Sunny had a chance to study. He had not even known that such things were possible, or existed.

And if all of that was not enough, Dire Fang's Aspect Abilities were flawlessly blended into his battle style, as well.

It would have been much worse if Sunny had to somehow guess the Saint's Abilities first. Luckily, he had already learned them from Cassie.

Dire Fang's Dormant Ability enhanced all his senses, especially his hearing and the sense of smell. He could even feel the tiny vibrations spreading through the ground… as a result, he had no blind spots. He also seemed to be able to predict the actions of his opponents by observing the tiniest changes in their stances, muscle contractions, eye movements, and other things Sunny had no knowledge of.

His Awakened Ability was a physical augmentation tied to his emotional state. The angrier he got, the more pain he felt, the more powerful he would become… things like that were usually unreliable and impossible to control, sometimes even detrimental, but Dire Fang seemed to possess absolute control over his emotions.

He could summon the most murderous rage at will, while remaining perfectly cool-headed and composed.

Dire Fang's Ascended Ability was the debilitating sonic attack, and his Transcendent Ability… well, it was self-evident.

So, with the knowledge of that…

Sunny had to come up with a way to kill him.

A Master killing a Saint… that had never happened in history.

But it had to happen today.

He was going to make it happen.

Chapter-1198: Battle of the Black Skull (12)

The three of them were like an obliterating hurricane. The bloody fight between Dire Fang, Sunny, and Nephis was no less furious and destructive than the clashes between the other Saints that were happening on the battlefield… or maybe even more so.

Any Awakened, Echo, or enthralled abomination that dared to enter the sphere of destruction created by their fight was instantly torn apart, and so, soon, no one dared to anymore.

All the soldiers could see were dark shapes moving with dreadful speed within the rain, and billowing clouds of scalding steam that were sometimes illuminated by bright flashes of beautiful white radiance.

Maybe only Kai could make out what was happening inside, due to his Awakened Aspect Ability.

'I hope the fool does not rush here to help us…'

Sunny was trying to dismantle Dire Fang's battle style to shadow him, but his progress was too slow.

Every second they spent fighting against the terrifying Saint threatened to be their last, and even if they continued to remain alive, their fates would be sealed due to simple exhaustion — both of their bodies and their souls.

Sunny and Nephis possessed astonishing endurance, and their pools of essence were many times larger than those of ordinary Masters. However, they still could not compete with a Saint.

Saints were monstrous not only because of their power and Aspect

Abilities, but also because of how potent and vast their reserves of essence were. To Masters like them, these reserves appeared nearly inexhaustible.

Especially to Sunny, who was burning through his essence fast due to the Shadow Shell. He was never going to win the war of attrition against Dire Fang.

So, he had to dismantle the Saint's battle style faster… much faster… even though he could not concentrate on this task since simply staying alive demanded almost all of his attention.

'Not good…'

He grunted as Dire Fang delivered a powerful backward kick with his wolf-like hind leg, almost ripping Sunny's shell to pieces. He managed to deflect the blow, and even tried to scratch the Saint with the Sin of Solace — but the jade blade got tangled in the thick fur, shearing some of it off, but leaving no trace on the enemy's skin.

Sunny had already delivered a shallow cut to Dire Fang before, so the [Sinister Whisper] was supposed to be driving the Saint mad… however, he showed no sign of being affected by the curse.

It seemed that breaking the mind of a Transcendent, which was the sharpest of weapons in and of itself, would not be easy, or possible at all.

'Mind, mind… the mind of a Transcendent…'

Sunny possessed a powerful mind himself. His cognitive ability and willpower were both abnormal. There was the blessing bestowed upon him by the Shroud of Dusk, as well.

And yet, it was not enough.

'Well, then…'

Suddenly, he thought of something very simple.

If his mind was not enough… wait, why the hell was he trying to solve the problem with only his own efforts, anyway?

He had a perfectly fine partner right there.

Summoning chains of shadow to try and bind the savage Saint, he saw most of them miss the mark, while the rest were easily torn apart and destroyed.

At the same time, he sent Nephis a mental message through the [Blessing of Dusk].

The message contained no words — there was no time for that. Instead, it was a much more crude, but also faster form of communication containing a mix of images, half-formed thoughts, and emotions.

For anyone else, it would have appeared as pure chaos, but Nephis knew him too well. They were so familiar with each other that even such an unadulterated stream of concepts was enough to form an understanding.

It was a bit like finishing each other's sentences or guessing each other's feelings from body language, but elevated to a completely different level.

And yet, it worked.

Nephis seemed to understand his intention instantly, and reciprocated.

A flood of concepts and images poured into his head.

Sunny's intention, of course, was very simple — since his own mind was not enough to dismantle Dire Fang's battle style fast enough, he wanted to join their minds together to accomplish that task faster. Mostly metaphorically, but also a bit literally.

Nephis might not have possessed the unnatural ability to peer into the very essence of a being through Shadow Dance, but she had been doing the same thing as Sunny this whole time, without a doubt — she had been studying the enemy, trying to discern the patterns of his battle technique to circumvent them. More than that, her insight, while not supernatural, was in no way lacking in value.

It was absolutely the opposite. Neph was a genius of combat, after all — she was born and bred for battle, and there were very few people in the world who possessed the same chilling level of affinity to bloodshed and destruction as her.

Sunny had his own insights about the way Dire Fang fought, and she had hers. By combining them, they would be able to enhance each other's understanding of the enemy in the same way that their powers were augmenting each other beyond the usual limits of their Aspects.

Hopefully.

Sunny growled and continued to fight. The shadow fiend sometimes moved like a human, and sometimes like the creature that he was. He bent in strange ways, used his long arms to dash on all fours like a wild animal, and delivered attacks with the onyx spike at the end of his tail.

His sword, his claws, his teeth, and his horns were all weapons, so he used them all in tandem.

When that was not enough, he summoned shadows or stepped through them to attack the Saint from an unexpected angle.

Nephis was pushing her body to the limit, as well. Her flames burned and danced, trying to envelop their enemy or coalescing into incinerating jets that could cut through flesh and bone with frightening ease. She seemed to possess an authority over the battlefield that was almost frightening.

And while they did that, they also exchanged a torrent of thoughts and concepts at tremendous speed.

Sunny was sharing his knowledge, while Nephis was sharing hers.

The pieces of the puzzle were flying into his head, slotting into the grand picture with satisfying clicks.

Some of them he had figured out himself, but some were new and unexpected. It seemed that Nephis possessed a perspective that was both similar and different from his own, but no less keen. She paid attention to things that Sunny would have never thought about, and

arrived at conclusions that he might have missed.

The same was true in reverse.

But together… together, they missed nothing. They saw everything.

It was as though they were omniscient.

And with that omniscience…

Everything clicked in place, and the essence of Saint Dire Fang was revealed to Sunny.

He hesitated for a moment, and then sent actual words to Nephis for the first time.

He said… or rather, thought.

[...Do you trust me?]

Chapter-1199: Battle of the Black Skull (13)

Sunny had done it. He had dismantled Dire Fang's astonishing battle style, and peered into the very essence of it. The core of the Saint's combat technique was laid bare, with all its components — the body, the mind, and the soul — revealed to Sunny with stark clarity.

With that knowledge, he could predict what Dire Fang would do.

He could even perform some of the same things despite the difference in their Aspects and physiques.

And armed with that understanding, Sunny finally realized…

That there was no way for them to win. The fearsome Saint was just too powerful, skilled, and intelligent. He held the outcome of the battle in a firm grasp, biding his time until the perfect opportunity inevitably presented itself.

And their own strength was not enough to change that outcome.

Even if Sunny knew that a strike was coming, he would not necessarily be fast enough to dodge it. Even if he knew the enemy's intent, he would not be strong enough to survive it.

And neither would Nephis.

At least if their level of strength, already unthinkable for mere Masters, remained the same.

...But it did not have to, did it?

[Do you trust me?]

'What a loaded question.'

Sunny had his reasons, but it was true that he had gone against Neph's wishes in pretty much every instance where it mattered. He had abandoned her in the Dark City, refused to leave her in the Crimson Spire, and then fled from her again at the grand ball of Clan Valor.

Just to end up by her side anyway.

It was a bit funny, and a bit sad, but most of all… Sunny wasn't sure if she did actually trust him. He wasn't even sure if he himself would have trusted him.

The same was true the other way around.

And yet, as far as he could see, that was their only chance to emerge from this fight alive. If he could only prove to her somehow that…

[I do.]

...What?

The calm answer came almost instantly.

It startled him.

'Huh…'

Sunny dashed away to avoid being caught in the Saint's maw, dove under lightning-fast claws, and barely managed to get out of the way of a stream of billowing white flame that covered his retreat.

'Well. That makes things easier.'

He called upon a certain Memory, and sent Nephis a short thought:

[Then, in about five seconds… give it all to me…]

Five seconds was the amount of time needed for the Memory to manifest itself. It was not a very large amount of time.

But in a battle against a Saint, it was like an eternity.

Sunny had long pushed himself to his limits, and then well past them.

Even while empowered by the Shadow Shell and augmented both by his shadows and Neph's flame, he could feel the terrible strain of the battle slowly breaking his body down.

It was already in a bad state, and would only continue to crumble as time went on.

However… it had not broken yet.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny threw himself into the furious crucible of battle. Dire Fang's massive body moved with dreadful speed, each of his limbs posing a fatal threat. His attacks were vicious, devastating, and explosive, but also perfectly timed and chillingly calculated.

Sunny knew when they would come and from where, but despite that, it was not easy to withstand the savage barrage of lethal blows unleashed by the monstrous beast. The ground split and trembled around them, and the clouds of steam created by Neph's flames obscured everything around.

And yet, he did withstand it.

Exactly five seconds later…

Sunny pushed himself off the muddy ground with three hands and flew forward, the tip of the Sin of Solace aimed at Dire Fang's neck. The Saint easily dodged it and retaliated with a powerful blow, which Sunny awkwardly blocked.

He let out a pained scream and was thrown backward, in the direction where Nephis was rising from her knees. Sunny landed on his feet and struggled to maintain his balance as he slid through the mud — he might have fallen, but she stepped forward and supported him from behind, placing a hand on his back.

Both of them were standing, but…

They had lost the advantage of surrounding the enemy from two sides. Worse than that… they were both in the single line of attack now, Nephis hidden behind the towering figure of the shadow fiend.

Dire Fang's bestial eyes ignited with satisfied malice.

…And at the same time, Sunny's fifth shadow, as well as all of Neph's flame, poured from her hand and into his shell. Leaving her entirely exposed, but gifting him with twice the amount of physical augmentation.

Instantly, his power exploded. His strength, his speed, his endurance, his agility — all of it soared to heights that Sunny had never experienced before. The two of them had experimented with augmenting each other in his basement, but he had not invented the Shadow Shell yet back then. Now, all the parts came together to create a truly terrifying combination.

Of course, it was not the smartest of tactics — by making one of them exceedingly strong while leaving the other one weak, they were giving Dire Fang a perfect opportunity to get rid of the weaker enemy first, and then deal with the other one without being encumbered by the numerical disadvantage.

But that was only true if the Saint survived long enough to figure out what happened.

Sunny was not planning on giving him such a chance.

He had to finish this fight in one exchange.

'So… I don't just need to kill a Saint, I also need to kill him with one strike… well, isn't it wonderful…'

There was no more time to think.

Only to kill.

Sunny cleared his mind of all unnecessary thoughts, except for one — an axiom he knew too well.

'The essence… of combat… is murder.'

He was going to murder Saint Dire Fang, the vassal of the great clan Song, right here and now.

There was no doubt or hesitation, no room for failure. Only certainty.

The terrifying, towering beast in front of him opened his maw, ready to let out a deafening roar.

Feeling the polished ivory of the Bone Singer manifest itself into his hand, Sunny flooded his body with smoldering essence, and lunged forward.

Chapter-1200: Battle of the Black Skull (14)

Time was moving very slowly…

No, it was Sunny who was moving too fast. It almost felt as if the world had frozen.

The rain was suspended in the air, the fountains of mud had grown still, the distant figures of dying Awakened were like grotesque statues.

In this nearly static world, only two things seemed unbound by paralysis — the monstrous Saint in front of him, who was no slower than Sunny himself, and a bolt of lightning that was crawling across the sky, extending toward the ground as it forked and illuminated the bloody battlefield.

'Faster!'

Suddenly, a deafening roar exploded from Dire Fang's mouth, strangely distorted and haunting. It would have hit Sunny like a wall…

But he was prepared.

The [Silenced] enchantment of the emerald bone flute activated, creating a dome of absolute silence around him. Sunny passed through the sorcerous roar without being struck by its crushing power… however, behind him, Nephis had to endure its full weight without the protection of her flames.

Stripped of their augmentation, she couldn't resist it like she had before.

Erasing the image of her falling figure from his mind, Sunny concentrated on the task.

If anything, the importance of success had only become more stark now that his partner was debilitated. If he failed, both of them were going to die.

But he had already rejected the possibility of failure.

He was going to win. He was going to do what he promised to do. He was going to kill a damned Saint!

At that moment, Dire Fang was more than a chance adversary to Sunny. He was the embodiment of everything Sunny wanted to destroy — the rotten authority of the great clans, the vile curse of the Chain of Nightmares, the torturous brand of powerlessness that he bore on his soul ever since Falcon Scott.

The inescapable shackles of fate.

He was the enemy. A terrifying enemy, an overwhelmingly powerful enemy, an enemy that was nearly impossible to defeat.

But…

If Sunny somehow did manage to defeat him…

Then maybe he would be able to overcome the other impossible obstacles that pressed him into the ground, one day.

Sunny was tired of losing. He had lost in the Antarctic Center, and now, because of Mordret and his cursed schemes, he was on the verge of losing here in East Antarctica, as well. And so, he was willing to bet everything on this one strike.

He had no choice but to finish it all with one strike — not only because Nephis was weakened and vulnerable right now, but also because of the nature of the Aspect powers Dire Fang possessed.

The Saint's already terrifying physical might was augmented by rage and pain. If Sunny delivered him a serious wound but failed to make it fatal, then that augmentation would only explode further, turning

his enemy into a truly unstoppable monster.

He only had one chance.

Sunny had already accomplished three incredible feats to earn that single chance. He had learned the secrets of Dire Fang's Aspect, deciphered the battle style of the Transcendent monster, and found a way to counteract his debilitating sonic attack. Now, all that remained was to cut him down with a sword.

Not that it would be easy.

The Saint was not waiting passively to be killed. He was already moving, rushing forward with speed that exceeded all reason. His claws were ready to tear Sunny apart, and his fangs were ready to sink into Sunny's flesh. Even though the gap of power between them had narrowed tremendously, Dire Fang still had an edge in terms of strength, weight, and sheer size.

But that was alright.

As a survivor of the Forgotten Shore, Sunny was a master of killing things that were larger and more powerful than him.

And while he had absorbed the essence of Dire Fang's battle style into Shadow Dance, the Saint had not gotten a firm grasp of his own technique yet.

How could he, when Sunny's technique was as formless and shapeless as shadows?

All Dire Fang could do was try and predict how his enemy would act based on his formidable experience of participating in countless battles. However, there was a problem with that approach, too.

That was because the Saint had never fought a shadow spawn before. He was still judging Sunny as if Sunny was a mere human.

But while Sunny still considered himself a human, he was also a bit more.

As the two of them closed the distance, prepared to strike, Sunny

used the inherent flexibility of a Shadow Dance practitioner to bend his body in an extreme and almost unnatural way. At the same time, he used the physical characteristics of his fiendish shell to switch from running on two feet to a low, beast-like gait.

As a result, the Saint's claws tore through the raindrops above his head, while his momentum remained the same.

Sunny gritted his teeth and let out a bestial growl as he used all his prodigious strength to push himself off the ground and leap into the air.

Dire Fang was too fast and skilled to allow the unexpected attack to reach its mark, though.

A split second before Sunny could bring his sword down on the Saint's neck…

A massive clawed hand pushed forward, catching him in the chest.

The power of that blow was too terrible.

The onyx of the Mantle cracked and exploded, as if struck by five Transcendent swords. The manifested shadows comprising the shadow fiend shell were instantly sliced and torn apart.

In an instant, the shadowspawn was mutilated beyond recognition. The upper portion of his torso was entirely destroyed, exploding into a fountain of darkness. His horned head was severed and flew into the air. Two of his four arms were ripped off.

The entire mangled carcass was thrown back.

The Sin of Solace slipped from his fingers.

That was the thing, though…

The shell of the shadow fiend was a towering monstrosity that stood at almost three meters of height.

Sunny, meanwhile, was a young man of a rather modest stature.

So, he could easily change the internal structure of the shell in a way that would allow him to sacrifice the upper portion of it while remaining perfectly unscathed.

...Almost at the same time as Dire Fang's claws tore through the upper chest and neck of the shadow fiend, the whole shell suddenly lost its coherence, starting to dissolve back into the ethereal shadows.

And, just below the harrowing cut, the top of Sunny's head was revealed.

The dissipating shell was thrown back by the strike, but his own body, freed from its embrace, continued to fly forward like a bullet.

Time stood still.

Catching the hilt of the Sin of Solace with his own human hand, Sunny used the tremendous augmentation of shadow and flame to fill his muscles with dreadful strength…

And drove the tip of his sword into the Saint's bestial eye.

Chapter-1201: Battle of the Black Skull (15)

Under the relentless onslaught of rain, blood was being washed off the shattered armor of a beautiful young woman with black hair and vermilion eyes. She swayed, trying to lash out with her cracked sword, but slipped in the mud and fell heavily to one knee.

Her breathing was hoarse, and her lips were painted crimson with blood.

Mordret looked much worse than his sister.

One of his eyes was gone, turning his face into a grotesque mask. So was one of his hands. His armor was on the verge of collapsing into a whirlwind of sparks, and terrible wounds covered his body, revealing flesh and bone.

And yet, his expression was calm.

'Ah… it hurts… I haven't felt pain like that in a long, long time…'

He was growing weak because of blood loss, his vision turning blurry. But he was so close to his goal… after long, excruciating years, the first true taste of his revenge was so near.

So, Mordret took a step forward, and then another.

His sword rose. His hand was firm and unshaken.

Morgan looked up at him, and the look in her eyes was sweeter than nectar. Confusion, indignation… and hidden behind them, a hint of fear.

"How… how are you still standing, monster…"

Mordret smiled.

'Barely...'

He was not going to engage in a lengthy conversation with her — not yet. He knew that his sister was just trying to buy time. Using one of the enchantments absorbed by her body, she was trying to heal herself — her wounds were already closing, and she was not bleeding nearly as heavily as she was supposed to.

It was not going to save her, though.

Morgan might have been able to heal herself, but she couldn't replenish her essence, her focus, and her stamina. She was tired, and that fatigue was only going to get worse. It was going to seep into her bones and into her mind, dooming her.

He just had to last a little bit longer than that.

His sister gathered what little remained of her strength and dashed forward with a furious growl. Her sword flashed, sharp and cunning, aiming for his neck… Mordret knew that he wouldn't be able to block or evade it, so he didn't.

Instead, he just shifted his torso slightly, allowing the sharp edge to cut into his clavicle instead of his neck, endured the blinding flash of pain, and drove his own sword into a crack in her armor.

Morgan groaned.

Before she could do anything, he swung the bloodied stump of his right hand, hitting her in the temple with the torn edge of the steel vambrace.

His sister was thrown back, dazed.

Mordret felt a bit lightheaded, too.

A long sigh escaped from his lips.

"Ah…"

Through the veil of rain covering the battlefield, he could see what was happening around them.

Clan Song… was losing.

The titanic worm was battered and mutilated, but three out of the four of his Reflections had already been destroyed. The last one — the one wearing Whispering Blade's face — was not going to last much longer, either.

Saint Madoc himself was close to prevailing in his harrowing battle against Beastmaster.

Silent Stalker and Summer Knight were still fighting, both stubbornly refusing to admit defeat. At this rate, both of them would perish, and even if the taciturn daughter of Ki Song prevailed, she wouldn't be able to continue participating in the battle.

Even the Reflection of Sir Gilead seemed to be failing against one of Nether's children that Sunless had somehow made his.

The scoundrel himself, meanwhile…

Mordret felt the desire to raise an eyebrow, but he was too weak and tired to do that.

'...Dire Fang is dead? Sunless and the Dreamspawn killed a Saint?'

This was a terrible, disastrous piece of news, but he couldn't help but feel… impressed.

'Good for them...'

Morgan tried to stand up, and he pushed her into the mud again with a cruel strike of his sword. There was more pain, and it was suddenly hard for him to keep balance.

By now, their clash looked nothing like a noble duel between two royal descendants. It was simply a brutal, graceless, vicious brawl… but Mordret liked it more that way. It was much more sincere. Much more honest.

Why would murder look pretty when it was so ugly?

His sister was still refusing to give up.

They clashed several more times, and each time, Mordret was on the losing end of the exchange.

…Until he wasn't.

At some point, somehow, almost unexplainably, he gained the initiative in this abhorrent dance of theirs. And once he did, his advantage grew like an avalanche.

No matter how many wounds he had accumulated, no matter how terribly Morgan hurt him, Mordret was unshaken. His one remaining eye glimmered, reflecting her dwindling confidence.

And then, after a while, Morgan fell and failed to stand up again.

Growling, she struck the ground with her first.

"I… I don't… I don't understand. How… are you… what trick…"

He smiled, dragging his aching body toward her.

Now was the time to talk — not only because Morgan had finally exhausted all her monstrous reserves, but also because he was tired, as well. He needed a few moments to catch his breath and prepare for the final strike.

"You don't understand? Oh, but it is so simple. There is no trick. Yes, you are stronger than me, faster than me… you are maybe even more skilled than me. However, dear sister, I am infinitely superior to you in one aspect. The most important aspect."

He struggled against the weight of his sword, which was suddenly unbearable, and gritted his teeth.

"...It's desire. Don't you know that everything has its beginnings in desire? And my desire, it's infinitely more powerful than yours. That is why I am more powerful than you… that is all there is, sister. Oh, and my desire is also much more pure."

'Can't she see? Well... she's young, after all...'

Mordret reached the spot where Morgan was trying to get up from the mud and ruthlessly kicked her in the side with his armored boot. She yelped, and fell back down.

He looked at her coldly.

"You see… my only desire is to kill you. But you, you want so many things. You want to kill and imprison me, but you also want to survive killing and imprisoning me. You want to protect your neck from being cut, your heart from being pierced, your skull from being crushed, your eyes from being gouged out. All these countless desires weigh you down.

They are a burden that reduces your strength, dulls your skill, and diminishes your speed. But me? I have no such burden. I only care about one thing. I only want to kill you. That is why you are weak, and I am strong."

Mordret used his one remaining eye to glance at the bloody stump of his right hand, at his broken armor, and at his mangled body.

His gaze was indifferent.

"...And that is why my wish will come true, but yours will not."

Without wasting any more time, he smiled bitterly, and raised his sword.

His goal was so close… he just had to bring the sword down.

However, he never did.

Chapter-1202: Battle of the Black Skull (16)

Somewhere else on the battlefield, a sword made of pure darkness pierced a figure made of blinding sunshine. The radiant knight staggered, while the tenebrous knight stood calmly, looking at him with two indifferent crimson eyes.

Saint twisted her sword, and the darkness contained within it seemed to expand, hungrily devouring the shine of her enemy. The Reflection of Summer Knight grew dimmer and convulsed, as if trying to scream.

However, no scream could be heard.

The radiant figure grew bleak and translucent. A moment later, a net of cracks suddenly appeared on the surface of the dying light, and then, with a faint sound of breaking mirrors, the Reflection exploded into countless shards of silver glass.

Saint indifferently retracted her sword and shifted her gaze, searching for a new opponent.

***

Separated from her by a vast distance, a gargantuan worm brought its monstrous weight down and then twisted, catching something invisible in its maw. The countless creatures comprising the Echo slithered, grinding the invisible foe into dust.

***

In the heart of the battlefield, obscured by rain, a beautiful demoness screamed as her face was cut by an unseen blade. She staggered back and fell, crimson tears rolling to the ground.

In front of her, a vague silhouette was suddenly outlined by the streams of falling water and the brilliance of flashing lightning.

A cold, ruthless voice came from the rain:

"Stupid girl… you should have stayed sweet and innocent, like you were before…"

Beastmaster gritted her teeth.

"I'm… I'm not done yet, old man… you haven't won yet…"

The rain laughed.

"Die, now… this little scuffle of ours was fun…"

***

[You have slain a Transcendent human, Dire Fang.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have received…]

The towering monstrosity swayed, the spark of life disappearing from his eyes. Sunny, who had driven the Sin of Solace into the Saint's skull up to the hilt, was perched precariously on the beast's snout, holding onto the grey fur with one hand. He froze for a moment.

'I… won?'

The body of Dire Fang tilted, and then toppled. Since the Saint's Transcendent form was quite high, there was considerable distance to the ground. Sunny rode it all the way down, still holding on to the hilt of the Sin of Solace.

The giant beast crashed, causing the ground to tremble. Still in shock, Sunny retrieved his sword and stood up, glancing at the battlefield from atop the felled giant.

'I won...'

Then, he lost his footing and rolled into the mud.

The mud felt cool and pleasant to the touch.

Behind him, the massive carcass rippled and shrunk, slowly turning into the corpse of a man.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, trying to comprehend the fact that he, Lost from Light, had really slain a Saint.

It was so strange.

He could still vividly remember the day when the Night Temple had been destroyed. Back then, the appearance of Saint Cormac had filled his heart with indescribable dread… the following battle between Cormac and Sky Tide was even more terrifying. He felt like an ant that had gotten stuck in the middle of a clash between two gods.

The entire island had been destroyed by their ferocious battle. It all had seemed… apocalyptic.

And now, Sunny had killed a similar being himself.

He had killed a Saint with his own two hands in combat.

…Of course, he didn't do it alone.

'Nephis!'

Suddenly startled, Sunny jumped to his feet and dashed to the spot where he had seen her last.

She was still there, struggling to stand up. Her helmet was gone, and he could see drops of blood falling from her ears, her nose, and even her eyes. Her face was pale, with damp hair sticking to it in thin strands.

"Neph!"

He slid on the mud and fell to his knees near her, placing his hands on her shoulders. She let out a raspy breath, and then shakily rose to her feet with his help. Sunny felt the warmth of the white flame flowing from his body into hers.

Slowly, her skin ignited with radiance, and wisps of white flame escaped from beneath it. The scratches on her face disappeared, and the steaks of blood evaporated, leaving it pale and pristine.

A pained groan escaped from her lips, and Nephis swayed. He supported her.

She remained silent for a bit, trying to contain the pain, and then asked:

"...We won?"

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

"Yeah. He's dead."

She winced.

"....Good."

He wanted to laugh.

"Good? Good?! That's all you have to say?"

Nephis looked at him for a few moments. Her face was too close, but Sunny didn't mind.

Then, a corner of her mouth slightly curled up.

"...Why make a fuss? It was… just a Saint…"

He stared at her, feeling a sense of triumph flood his heart.

But then…

The smile slowly disappeared from Sunny's face.

***

Separated from them by the wicked havoc of the battle, a blind girl was standing in the middle of a vast circle of corpses, drops of blood falling from her rapier and her armor. Behind her, a woman with golden hair and amber eyes was leaning heavily on a spear.

Suddenly, the blind girl shivered and lowered her sword. Her shoulders fell.

Turning around, she ignored the rushing enemies and looked up, at the cloud-ridden sky.

Her exquisitely beautiful face was solemn.

***

Mordret raised his sword, ready to strike his sister down.

But then, he froze.

His strange, mirror-like eyes trembled.

As if forgetting about Morgan, he slowly turned around and looked at the sky with a grim expression.

***

The smile slowly disappeared from Sunny's lips.

The wind was cold.

In the flash of lightning, he suddenly looked paler than a ghost. His face fell.

Nephis frowned.

"Sunny? What's wrong?"

He looked frightened.

Without answering, Sunny slowly turned away from her and looked up with an expression of utter terror.

"I… I don't… I don't know… something is wrong…"

His voice drowned in a deafening thunderclap. Neph hesitated for a moment, then traced his gaze and looked up at the sky.

There didn't seem to be anything there.

...Except for a strange, rippling darkness.

For a few moments, the battlefield seemed to grow still.

And then, the sky crumbled and split apart, devoured by an abyssal rift that seemed to be leading to the very depths of hell.

A gargantuan Nightmare Gate tore the world into pieces, dwarfing the battlefield as it cut through the sky and manifested itself into existence.

Chapter-1203: Battle of the Black Skull (17)

The sky parted, sliced through by a narrow vertical rift. Behind it, the fabric of reality made way for a dark, harrowing abyss of nothingness — both light and darkness seemed to be twisted and changed near the Gate, breaking as they were destroyed.

The rift dwarfed the entire battlefield, stretching for hundreds and hundreds of meters into the shattered sky. The abandoned outpost, and the black fissure of the Nightmare Gate that led to the vicinity of the Black Skull, looked tiny and insignificant in front of it.

An invisible shockwave rolled outward from the point where the gargantuan rift touched the ground, exerting an almost irresistible force. Sunny braced himself, but still staggered as the wave passed through him, barely managing to stay on his feet.

His mind was drowned by the deafening, cacophonous howling of the Call — it was many times louder, more unbearable, and maddeningly demanding than it had ever been before.

Sunny desperately resisted the overwhelming desire to submit.

All around them, the Awakened warriors screamed as they grabbed their heads and fell to their knees. Their eyes were wide open, but unseeing. Some were bleeding, and some seemed to be crawling toward the Gate. Some were thrown to the ground by the shockwave.

The invisible force made no distinction between those serving Valor and those serving Song — they were all the same in the face of the harrowing rift.

Mundane humans, if any had come to witness this battle, would have been outright killed by the pressure of the Gate.

Sunny staggered back and looked up at it in terror.

His lips moved.

"Four… it's a Category Four Nightmare Gate…"

And, just as he said those words…

The world shook again, and another rift tore through the sky.

The world convulsed, and one more sliced the fabric of reality apart.

Like three dark pillars holding up the heavens— or three vile spears cruelly thrust into the flesh of the world — three colossal Nightmare Gates surrounded the battlefield, cutting out all paths of retreat.

Not that there was a way to escape them.

The three armies — the valiant warriors of Clan Valor, the fearless soldiers of Clan Song, and those Awakened of the Evacuation Army that had come as escorts of Saint Cor —were trapped between the abhorrent black rifts.

...And then, something vast moved in the abyssal darkness of the first Gate.

Those who had enough presence of mind left to see witnessed something shift within the Nightmare Gate. A moment later, giant fingers suddenly pushed from it into the waking world, each as large as a tower. There were dozens of them, all dark and strangely human-like, with black, broken fingernails and torn, calloused skin.

The fingers felt around blindly, then grabbed the edges of the vertical rift and strained, as if trying to pull it wider.

The most horrifying part of it all was…

That they succeeded.

The world trembled, and a net of black cracks seemed to spread through the sky. Then, the gaping wound of the Nightmare Gate was torn open, and a seething mass of the same dark flesh flowed out of it

like an appalling avalanche.

The flesh expanded, turning into gargantuan black tentacles, which then shot forward with stunning speed.

Sunny took a step back. His eyes widened.

Somewhere far away from him, on the opposite side of the battlefield, the towering tortoise Echo was ripped apart with a single swing of a black tentacle. The Awakened sheltered in the stone fort on its carapace were thrown into the air, and the Transcendent creature instantly exploded into a whirlwind of sparks.

Someplace else, the tentacles reached the massive figure of the titanic worm. The titan rose its repulsive body into the air to meet them… but a moment later, it was torn to shreds, destroyed, and consumed, disappearing without a trace.

A scrawny figure jumped onto the back of a black steed, who then raced away. A split second later, the Reflection of Silent Stalker disappeared under the tide of dark flesh, and a faint sound of breaking glass rang quietly.

Most shocking of all…

Not too far away from the Gate, Beastmaster suddenly staggered back from the vague figure outlined in front of her, blood flowing from her mangled face.

A moment later, a black tentacle whipped through the empty air with terrible speed, and a fountain of blood suddenly bloomed where the vague figure had stood a moment ago. There was no time to react, and no chance to escape.

Pieces of torn flesh became visible as they splattered all around, unrecognizable as parts of a human being.

Just like that, Saint Madoc, the Whispering Blade, brother of the King of Swords and an elder of the great clan Valor, was no more.

He was dead.

Far away, Sunny and Nephis watched the world end in stunned silence.

'It's a Great… a Great Terror? A Great Titan?'

Sunny shivered, hypnotized by the terrible sight of a Great Nightmare Creature forcing its way into the waking world.

Everything he had known seemed meaningless in front of it. The mere thought of trying to resist felt futile.

That was when the darkness within the other two Gates moved, as well.

He considered his chances of outrunning the tide of Corrupted and Great abominations that would enter the waking world in mere moments. Even with Nightmare and Shadow Step… the chances…

Were zero.

If even the Saints were obliterated in seconds, a Master like him had no chance at all.

Nephis suddenly shuddered, and then grabbed him by the shoulder. Her lips parted:

"...Realm! Escaping into the Dream Realm! That is the only way!"

He stared at her with hollow eyes, trying to understand the meaning of these words.

'What is she on about?'

Then, with tremendous effort, Sunny forced himself to calm down and regain his composure.

He could... barely... think again.

Escaping into the Dream Realm?

That was indeed a chance.

No one knew what they would find there, but it could very well be

better than being trapped between three Category Four Nightmare Gates.

At least, that way, there was a possibility of survival.

Here, there was only death.

Or something much worse.

The problem was that the process of traveling between worlds was not instantaneous. It took time to open the door between the waking world and the Dream Realm, and even more time to step through.

Would they be fast enough to escape?

'...There is only one way to find out.'

Staring at the Great horror slowly pushing its vast body through the broken abyssal rift, Sunny took a deep breath, and tried to feel his Dream Realm anchor.

Chapter-1204: Battle of the Black Skull (18)

Sunny and Nephis stood side by side as they watched utter devastation being unleashed by the creature crawling out of the colossal Nightmare Gate. The gargantuan black tentacles were still far away, but they were getting closer with every moment.

Numerous Awakened had already been killed, and more were going to die soon.

It was… too sudden, too much.

There were a lot of things that Sunny needed to comprehend, accept, and think about… the future… Cassie, Effie, and Kai… Jet…

But there was no time to think. It was almost impossible, anyway — the Call was roaring in his mind, making any kind of thought difficult. All he could do right now was concentrate on his own survival.

One thing Sunny did do, however, was dismiss his Shadows. They would be of no help against the Great being, but losing them to this catastrophe was just too easy.

'Ruined… it's all ruined…'

Sunny tried to sense his connection to the Dream Realm.

As a Master, he could leave the waking world at will. It took some time to activate the connection, and usually, he would be transported to his anchor Citadel in a matter of minutes.

That was not going to happen today, of course. Being in close proximity to a Nightmare Gate disturbed the anchor, so entering the

Dream Realm near them meant being pulled by the Call and entering the area surrounding the Seed instead.

Currently, Sunny was in the area of effect of four different Nightmare Gates. He didn't even know which Seed he would be pulled to, but anything was better than remaining on the desolate plain that was going to be flooded with indescribably powerful abominations very soon.

'Hurry, hurry, hurry…'

In front of him, a scene out of a nightmare was playing out. No one on the battlefield was strong enough to resist the being unleashed by the Nightmare Gate — all they could do was try to run, fail, and die.

Those who succumbed to the Call could not even run.

Scores of Awakened, Echoes, and enthralled abominations were all being torn apart and pulverized. The seething mass of dark flesh, meanwhile, continued to squeeze itself through the Gate.

The black fingers continued to hold the rift apart, but there was also a gargantuan hand that had emerged from the abyssal nothingness entirely, plunging down to grab a fistful of screaming humans.

'I need to… succumb to the Call, as well.'

Sunny had spent the last… it was close to eight months, by now… the last eight months having his mind almost constantly assaulted by the insidious whispers of the Call. Sometimes, they were loud, and sometimes they were quiet enough to seem nearly absent.

It had been hard to deal with the maddening pressure at first, but slowly, he developed a sort of resistance to the Call. He had learned how to fight it.

But now, in a bizarre turn of events, he had to surrender to it. It was a frightening and uncomfortable feeling… the feeling of releasing control…

'There.'

He sensed it, his connection to the Dream Realm. Strange and distorted, it was still there — in fact, it was much stronger than before. The whispers of the Call grew even more deafening, screaming, demanding for him to make use of it.

Feeling a strange ecstasy and an immense sense of relief flood his mind, Sunny submitted to their will.

Concentrating, he pulled on the connection, and felt the border between the two worlds becoming weaker and more ethereal. Before, it had been like an impregnable wall, but now, it was more akin to fog. And he was slowly entering that fog.

It was as though something was pulling him from the other side…

Or maybe expelling him from this one.

And that was it.

That was all he could do.

Now, Sunny just had to hold on to that feeling and hope that he would leave the waking world before the great and terrible being entering it squashed him like one would a bug.

The three colossal Gates stretched into the broken sky like festering wounds. The dark tentacles were rampaging on the battlefield — some whipped around, obliterating the armies of the great clans, some plunged into the soil and grew taut, pulling more and more of the Great abomination into the waking world.

Sunny and Nephis stood motionless amidst the harrowing destruction. They did not try to run or search for shelter.

There was nowhere to run, anyway, and no shelter to be found. The spot where they had fought Dire Fang was as good as any other. It was all up to chance now.

Turning away from the black tentacles that were getting closer and closer, they looked at each other.

Sunny felt the ground under his feet quake, the tremors growing

stronger and stronger. It was as though something was approaching them, shaking the world with each heavy step.

He didn't even look to see what was appearing from the other two Gates.

Instead, he just looked at Nephis.

She was pale and weakened, but seemed calm.

She always seemed calm, even when she wasn't.

After a few moments, Sunny opened his mouth, which was suddenly excruciatingly dry, and said:

"...I'll see you on the other side."

Nephis looked back at him, something grotesque and lumbering reflecting in her striking grey eyes.

She nodded.

"Yes."

Then, she hesitated for a second, and took a deep breath.

"Sunny… I need to tell you something."

He gritted his teeth, suddenly frightened that what she was going to say would sound like a farewell. Nevertheless, he forced himself to ask:

"What?"

Neph lingered for a bit.

Then, as the ground under them trembled violently, she suddenly looked away.

What she said next was entirely unexpected.

"The projector… back in your house… it... it didn't really explode by itself. I lied. Actually, I broke it. So... I'm really sorry."

Sunny stared at her in disbelief. His mind short-circuited for a moment.

'How is her tone so… what…'

He blinked, and then scoffed.

"Why the hell…"

However, he did not finish the sentence.

Suddenly, the world disappeared, and Sunny saw — or rather, perceived — a boundless void. It was the familiar, empty void between dream and reality.

A moment later, he was suddenly blinded by bright sunlight, and assaulted by unbearable heat.

Falling on something soft and scorching, Sunny rolled and frantically tried to sense the surrounding space through the shadows.

The battle was now behind him.

…He had reached the Nightmare Desert.

Chapter-1205: Into the Fire

Heat.

It was hot. Lethally hot… a mundane human would not have lasted in this suffocating heat for long. Even as a Master, Sunny was struggling to breathe. His skin was burning.

Sitting on the sand, hunched, he covered his eyes and looked up at the merciless white sun.

The sun was like a small silver coin that hung high in the cloudless azure sky.

White sand. Azure sky.

This was indeed the desert Nephis had once tried to cross. The one that lay east of the Forgotten Shore, stretching far and wide along the Hollow Mountains.

He couldn't see the dreadful black peaks, though. Either this part of the Nightmare Desert was much further north than the small fragment Nephis had traversed, or much further east, where the Hollow Mountains were no more.

In either case, Sunny was in big trouble. Nephis had told them that the further one went into the desert, the more dangerous it became. Eventually, she could not advance anymore, and chose to take her chances in the mountains instead…

Just how deadly was this desert, for Nephis to decide that venturing into a known Death Zone was a better choice?

There was one more thing, too… if it was the same desert, then he had to find shelter before the night came. Failing to do so meant death.

Death...

Sunny sighed.

He was sitting on the white sand, casting five stark shadows. A few dozen seconds had already passed since his arrival in this cursed land, and very soon, something was bound to find and attack him.

He had to move, but his mind was plagued by too many thoughts.

'It's useless… it's all useless…'

Just a few minutes ago, Sunny had been full of a sense of triumph. He had defeated a Saint. He had won. His desperate plan had come so close to fruition…

With Dire Fang's death, the balance on the battlefield had been bound to shift. Mordret's reflections would have been destroyed… the remaining two enemy Saints would have been either killed or forced into retreat.

Clan Valor would have achieved a sweeping victory. None of its key figures would have perished, and plenty of Awakened would have remained alive to continue defending East Antarctica until the winter solstice.

…None of that had happened, of course. Everything had ended in ruin.

He had lost. Once again, he had been utterly defeated.

It was so tiring, to always have victory slip through his fingers at the last moment.

'Curse it all…'

Sunny was being crushed by the weight of failure.

Two great clans had clashed with each other, but the only victor was the Nightmare Spell. These three Category Four Gates… it wasn't hard to imagine what was going to happen next in the Southern Quadrant.

Both armies were either already annihilated or would be soon… oh, and more than a few government elites, too. All the Awakened of Valor and all the Awakened of Song were as good as dead. The only ones who had a chance to survive were the Masters, the Saints, and a handful of people those Saints could drag with them into the Dream Realm.

Even then, it was not a guarantee that they would have had enough time to escape.

And those who had would still have to survive the Nightmare Desert.

…The siege capitals would be left without the most powerful defenders. And much worse still, there would be swarms of Corrupted and Great abominations roaming the continent now.

Everyone was going to die.

'Don't think about it. Don't think about it yet.'

Sunny gritted his teeth.

There was a lot on his mind… but if he continued thinking about it, he would drown in anger and despair. For now, he couldn't allow himself to lose focus — he had to survive first.

Sunny was lost in a region of the Dream Realm that was much more harrowing than the Forgotten Shore, without any way to get back to the waking world. His friends could be lost somewhere between the white dunes, too.

He had to find them… if they were still alive… and figure out a way to escape this hell.

Well… it was not his first time escaping hell, was it?

Where there was a will, there was a way…

'What a bunch of crap…'

He felt a slight tremor run through the sand beneath him and grimaced.

Escape… how could he escape the Nightmare Desert?

There were four ways.

The first one was to cross the desert and find a path through the Hollow Mountains. Needless to say, surviving a journey through two entire Death Zones was highly improbable.

The second way was to find one of the Saints who had survived the Nightmare Gates and successfully escaped into the desert. Saints could travel back to the waking world without the help of a Gateway, and they could even bring a person or two with them.

Sunny was not sure that he could convince anyone except for Saint Tyris to save him instead of all others… and there were still Nephis, Cassie, Effie, Kai, and Jet to think about.

Any Saint that left would not be coming back to this corner of the desert, since that would require returning to the proximity of the gargantuan Nightmare Gates.

So… that way would most likely not work, either.

The third way was to become a Saint himself. That was, of course, even more suicidal than trying to traverse both the Nightmare Desert and the Hollow Mountains. Sunny had barely survived the Second Nightmare.

He had been beheaded, had his heart ripped out of his chest, barely survived thanks to stumbling on Noctis by pure luck, almost lost himself in the endless sea of nightmares, fought against an entire army of Awakened, and even faced Mordret at the end.

The Third Nightmare would be much more harrowing… and even if he somehow Transcended, there was a high possibility that the Sovereigns would make him disappear as a result.

Which left only the fourth way. The only plausible one.

Sunny had to find the Black Skull Citadel, and use its Gateway to return to the waking world.

That, too, was more easily said than done. The Nightmare Desert, after all, was vast. And full of all kinds of horrors.

The main problem, though, was that only two people knew the location of the Citadel.

One of them was Morgan, and the other one was Mordret.

…So, he had to find one of them first.

'Either one will do.'

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, and then suddenly jumped back.

A split second after he did, the sand under him exploded, and countless hands rose from beneath it, clawing at the air.

'Here we go. It's starting...'

Chapter-1206: Nightmare Desert

A tenebrous black steed was flying across the white sands of the Nightmare Desert, pursued by an unseen horror. Sunny was leaning from the saddle, shielding his eyes against the scorching wind as he brandished the Sin of Solace. A hand that shot from beneath the ground was cleanly severed and dissolved into a swirl of ash.

'Curses… that thing is persistent.'

Behind him, a vast swath of the desert was changing. It was almost imperceptible unless one knew what to look for — the minute tremors running through the sand, the slight tilt of the dunes, the subtle shifting of the shadows…

Something enormous was moving beneath the sand, following him.

He had already used four out of his five shadows to augment Nightmare, leaving only one to strengthen the enchantment of the Memory of Fire through the [Underworld Armament]. That allowed him some measure of relief from the unbearable heat of the desert, at least.

But even with the help of the four shadows, his mount was not fast enough to outrun the creature.

Much worse, it was not the only abomination in this part of the desert.

In fact, Sunny was surrounded by Nightmare Creatures.

There were too many of them to count, all moving in the same direction… they were responding to the call, pulled to the blooming Seed of Nightmare by its sweet promise.

Luckily, most abominations seemed to be in a strange state. It was as

though they were hypnotized, forgetting about everything except for the goal of reaching the Seed and entering the waking world through it. As long as Sunny did not get in their way, most paid him no attention.

It was deeply disturbing, really.

Sunny had only ever seen Nightmare Creatures in the throes of murderous frenzy. Having them walk past him with detached indifference was somehow more frightening than facing them in a bloody battle.

'Crap, crap, crap…'

The desert was wide and flawlessly white, and the towering figures of abominations were moving across it with measured steps, separated from each other by a considerable distance. Their shadows were like long lines of stark blackness.

The length of the shadows meant that the sun was already low. The night was not far away…

Cursing, Sunny guided Nightmare to the left, aiming at the nearest of the walking figures. From the looks of it, it was a Corrupted Monster… the thing was massive and ghastly, with four mighty paws and a tail like that of a scorpion. Its insect-like eyes were staring at something hidden far beyond the horizon.

The creature was dangerous.

…But Sunny was more dangerous.

As Nightmare flashed past the monster at stunning speed, the Sin of Solace swung, cleanly severing the abomination's head. They shot past the beheaded creature and continued forward without ever slowing down.

A few moments later, countless hands rose from beneath. Rushing away, Sunny turned his head and watched as the hands grabbed the bleeding carcass and pulled it into the sand. Soon, only a few drops of boiling blood remained on the surface.

It was as though the massive monster had never existed.

The unknown horror stopped following him after that, at least, its hunger seemingly satiated by the morbid offering.

'Damnation…'

After a while, he could finally allow himself to slow down.

Stopping Nightmare at the crest of a tall dune, Sunny breathed heavily, then wrapped two more shadows around himself, enhancing the effect of the Memory of Fire. That way, he was almost comfortable.

Summoning the Endless Spring, he drank deeply, allowing the cool water to breathe some life back into his body. Then, he stared at the beautiful glass bottle in his hand.

Suddenly, this dormant Memory of the fourth Tier was the most precious thing in his possession. Who would have thought that it would be so important one day?

Water was important. But usually, there were many ways to procure it — during his Wilderness Survival courses, Sunny had learned many ways of finding or creating drinkable water in a variety of environments.

But none of them would work in this terrible desert.

With a sigh, he dismissed the Endless Spring and looked around.

From the height of the dune, Sunny could see far and wide. He could send his shadows to explore, too, if need be. However, that would be risky… he wasn't sure that he was ready to part with even a single shadow in this dangerous and unpredictable land.

There was no need to, anyway.

There were white dunes around him as far as the eye could see. Countless Nightmare Creatures could be seen, as well, moving in the same direction. There were also black ruins peppering the desert, half-buried in sand.

Those ruins did not really seem like the remains of buildings. Their shape was too strange, and their dimensions were all wrong. The structures, whatever they had once been, all differed in size… a smaller ruin would not be much of a shelter, but some of the larger ones he saw could save him come the night.

…Of course, there was also the black pyramid.

Sunny held his breath as he looked at its ominous silhouette.

The Tomb of Ariel was always in view, far in the distance. However, no matter how long one moved in the direction of the perfectly symmetrical black edifice, it never grew closer, remaining out of touch like a mirage.

'That thing might not even be real.'

…But Sunny felt that it was. He also knew that there had to be a way to get closer to it — Nephis had never seen the black pyramid before, after all, which meant that it could only be seen from certain parts of the desert.

Which also meant that there had to be a path to it.

'Who cares?'

Sunny certainly didn't. He had no ambitions of conquering the Tomb of Ariel. In fact, he wanted to avoid it at all costs.

All he wanted to do was find his friends and escape the cursed desert, as soon as possible.

Grimacing, Sunny chose one of the larger ruins that rose from the sand many kilometers away, and sent Nightmare into a gallop.

Chapter-1207: First Night

On the way to the ruin, Sunny stumbled on a human. It was the first survivor of the Battle of the Black Skull that he saw in the desert… sadly, the man was already dead.

His body lay on the white sand, staring at the merciless azure sky with glassy eyes. Sunny vaguely recognized him as one of Clan Song's Ascended — they had never spoken to each other before, but he recalled seeing the man during the battle against the titanic horde, back in East Antarctica.

The Ascended's Memory armor had dissipated after its master's death, so the body was only covered by a torn bodysuit. There were several wounds in view, but none of them were serious enough to doom a Master. It was unclear what had brought upon the man's death… maybe there was severe internal damage, or maybe it was simply the heat that had killed him.

With a sigh, Sunny jumped off Nightmare, kneeled, and closed the man's eyes. There was not much more he could do, so he just remained motionless for a few moments, then climbed back into the saddle and continued on his way.

His mood was somber.

In the end, the sun had almost disappeared beyond the dunes by the time Sunny reached the large ruin. Scared by the prospect of remaining in the open after dark, he hurriedly dismissed his Shadow and climbed over the weathered black stones. He quickly found a narrow fissure in the sand-covered floor and squeezed through it, eventually reaching an underground chamber.

Near the end of the narrow crawlway, the stones shifted under his weight, and Sunny fell down in an avalanche of sand.

He landed awkwardly and was about to let out a relieved sigh when something cold touched his neck.

A steel blade.

A hoarse voice resounded from above:

"What do we have here…"

Sunny carefully put his fingers on the blade of an enchanted glaive and slowly pushed it away from his skin.

"Can you not? I really don't want to have my head cut off… again…"

There was a moment of silence, and then a soft gasp.

"Sunny?"

Looking up, he saw a curious scene.

The underground chamber was not very large, and there were two beautiful women hiding inside. Both of them were bruised and battered, with grim expressions on their enticing faces.

One of them was Jet, and the other one was Song Seishan.

Soul Reaper was closer to the hole he had fallen from, so she had lashed out with her glaive on instinct.

"Yeah, it's me. Say… why are you two sitting here in complete darkness?"

Jet retracted her weapon, took a step back, and tiredly lowered herself onto the cold stones. A stifled scoff escaped from her lips.

"...We weren't sure if the light would attract danger."

She remained silent for a moment, and then said:

"I'm really glad that you're alive."

Sunny sat up, brushed the sand off the Shroud of Dusk, and summoned a luminous memory. The two women grimaced, shielding

their eyes from the bright light.

Now that he could see colors better, he judged that they were in a worse state than he had initially thought. Jet's armor was torn rather severely, and Seishan's dress was ripped, as well. Its wine-colored fabric seemed dirtied by blood.

He coughed, trying not to stare.

"Me too…"

That sounded too sentimental, so Sunny corrected himself:

"I mean, I'm glad to be alive, too. Anyway, the light won't attract the abominations. Most of them are being pulled toward the Seeds, and those that are going to rise at night… well… I guess with a Category Four Gates, some of them will leave for the waking world, as well. The rest will be too busy fighting each other. As long as we're out of sight, we should be safe."

He fell silent.

Indeed, the true horror of the Nightmare Desert — the dead soldiers that endlessly continued their ancient battle in the darkness, night after night, as they had for thousands of years — had not entered the waking world during the Chain of Nightmares. That was because most of them were too terrible and powerful to step through Category Three Gates. Now, though… now, things would be different.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, staring at Jet and Seishan. Both were in sorry states, but at least they were alive.

He summoned the Endless Spring and said:

"I have water, by the way."

Their eyes gleamed.

"Then give it here!"

Jet was the first one to snatch the bottle, acting with a terrible lack of decorum. Well, thirst would do that to a person… Seishan, who had

been a second too late, stared at her coldly. Nevertheless, she patiently waited for her turn while Soul Reaper greedily drank from the Endless Spring.

Once Jet was finished, she let out a delighted sigh and passed the bottle to the daughter of Ki Song. The latter, at least, had enough composure to bow slightly and say "thank you" before bringing the Memory to her parched lips.

Sunny watched this scene incredulously.

"...Weren't the two of you trying to kill each other? I swear I saw you fight. How come you're together?"

Jet leaned back and smiled.

"Yes, we were trying to kill each other. This wench even tried to bite me… ah, it was really gross! But what does it matter now? Here in the desert, there are no sides. Just us, and the Nightmare Creatures. So, there was no reason to fight anymore when we stumbled on each other."

Seishan gave her a long look.

"Who are you calling a wench, you corpse?"

She grimaced, as if nauseated.

'Wait… did Seishan try to drink Jet's blood? Ha… it must not have tasted too pleasant, judging by that expression.'

Of all the people on the battlefield, she just had to go and clash with the only person who countered her Aspect. Compared to her, even Sunny's luck seemed wonderful.

Seishan lingered for a few moments, then returned the Endless Spring and gave Sunny a long look.

"What about you, Sunless? The last I saw of you, Dire Fang was heading to your position. How did you survive?"

Sunny received the glass bottle and smiled pleasantly.

"Oh… actually, I killed him."

The two of them stared at him with wide eyes.

'Right. I received a reward for slaying Dire Fang. I didn't even check…'

Seishan opened her mouth to say something, but at that moment, they heard a terrifying sound. It came from above, from the sides… from everywhere.

The dead were rising to continue their eternal battle.

Soon, a distant cacophony of titanic blows and inhuman roars seeped into the chamber through the hole in its roof, and the stones surrounding them vibrated. Streams of sand flowed through the cracks in the black tiles.

No one was in the mood to talk after that.

They just sat in silence, tense, and waited…

Time passed.

Then, a different sound reached their ears.

Someone — or something — was crawling through the narrow fissure, descending into the underground chamber.

Chapter-1208: Newcomer

Instantly, all three of them — Sunny, Jet, and Seishan — were on guard. Jet readied her glaive, while Sunny gripped the hilt of the Sin of Solace tighter. Seishan, meanwhile, lowered her hands slightly, as if preparing to defend herself with bare fists.

The cursed sword whispered into Sunny's ear:

"Use them as a shield… take a step back, and let whatever comes feast on their flesh first…"

Sunny struggled to ignore it.

Before, he had not dared to send his shadows outside to keep an eye on the desert — with how dreadful the creatures populating it at night were, many of them were bound to possess means of destroying intangible things. Sunny did not want to risk one of his shadows being obliterated.

But now, he regretted that decision.

As his expression hardened, streams of sand fell from above, and then, someone jumped softly on the stone plates of the chamber's floor.

Sunny felt immense relief. It was a human…

Jet remained on guard, but Seishan seemed to relax. She straightened slightly and let out a soft sigh, her exquisitely beautiful face illuminated by a pale smile.

"Ascended Xu… you have survived, as well."

They were safe. The newcomer was not a terrifying Nightmare Creature — it was a survivor like the three of them. One of the

Masters of Clan Song.

The man groaned slightly, then shielded his eyes from the bright light of the luminous Memory. His hand trembled slightly.

"Lady… Lady Song?"

Looking at him, Sunny suddenly felt a chill run down his spine.

A sense of fear like he had never experienced before wrapped its fingers around his heart.

He almost staggered back, but forced himself to remain in place, wearing the same expression as before.

'W—what… the hell…'

Sunny stared at the newcomer.

The man was tall and muscular. His black hair was cut short, revealing a strong, handsome face. His eyes were like two pools of darkness, and there was a strained smile on his cracked lips.

Ascended Xu wielded no weapons and wore no armor. He was dressed in a dark-red bodysuit, which was torn, revealing ugly lacerations and bruises covering his body.

…It was, without a doubt, the dead man whose eyes Sunny had closed just a few hours ago.

Sunny shivered, and even the blurry figure of the Sin of Solace who stood beside him suddenly seemed wary.

Seishan took a deep breath.

"Master Xu! Thank the gods… have you seen any of my sisters?"

The man looked around, then said hoarsely:

"...No, my lady. I… have not seen anyone. Only you."

'Is it some kind of regenerative Aspect? No, wait… is it that bastard, Mordret?'

Sunny stared at the newcomer, studying his every move.

Then, he shifted his perception and looked within the newcomer.

…The blade of the Sin of Solace trembled slightly.

Within the body of Master Xu, where a radiant soul core should have been… instead, there was nothing but vile, impenetrable darkness. A darkness so vast and deep that Sunny couldn't even conceive its magnitude.

Jet was not in a hurry to lower her glaive. Looking at the… creature… she frowned slightly and asked:

"How did you survive being outside during the night?"

The creature wearing the corpse of Ascended Xu looked at her and shivered.

"...Barely, my lady. Just barely."

Then, the creature smiled.

"Are there more people nearby?"

The question was directed at Jet, so Sunny could remain silent. He shifted slightly, considering their options.

'It's a Nightmare Creature… a Nightmare Creature that can control a corpse and speak the human language flawlessly. It even knew Seishan's name. It can even perfectly imitate human behavior. If not for Weaver's lineage, I would not have known at all. It… it is… it is unlike anything I have seen or heard about before.'

…And the creature was strong enough to walk the Nightmare Desert at night.

The three of them were trapped in a small underground chamber with a creature like that.

Sunny felt terror.

He activated the Blessing of Dusk and sent Jet a mental message, trying to sound calm:

[That thing is not human.]

Jet sighed, then shook her head.

"There might be, but we haven't met anyone else. The four of us will have to stick together."

At the same time, she answered Sunny:

[I know. Its soul… is much more vast than a Master's soul should be. Or a Saint's soul, even. It is… harrowing.]

Then, Sunny sent a message to Seishan.

[That is not Ascended Xu. Think of an answer, and I will hear it.]

The beautiful woman did not show any sign of surprise as her answer resounded in his mind:

[What are you talking about? I know this man. He and I grew up together… wait. Did the son of Anvil take his body?]

'Gods. I never thought I would say something like that… but I wish it really was Mordret…'

Sunny summoned the runes, seeking the prize he had received for slaying Dire Fang.

[No. Something else took his body. His dead body. Something old, vast... and powerful. I saw the corpse on the way to the ruin.]

The creature, meanwhile, seemed a little disappointed. Its smile grew bleak.

"Of course. We will stick together… and search for more people. Once the morning comes. Yes?"

Sunny stared at a particular string of runes, and then offered the Endless Spring to the corpse of Ascended Xu. Forcing out a smile, he

said:

"That sounds like a plan. Here… some water. You must be dying of thirst."

The creature accepted the glass bottle with an awkward nod.

"Yes. Yes… I am thirsty…"

Sunny smiled as he watched it bring the bottle to the corpse's lips.

Then, without changing expression, he silently thrust the Sin of Solace into the creature's chest.

At the same time, a blade made of darkness appeared from behind, piercing the dead man's back. Saint escaped from the shadows, her eyes burning with crimson flames.

A whirlwind of white sparks rose around Sunny, almost filling the entire chamber.

Jet and Seishan were already moving, too.

The creature looked at the Endless Spring, which was disappearing from the corpse's hand, and tilted its head a little.

"Yes… I am thirsty..."

Its smile widened into a grin, and Ascended Xu's face was distorted by that grin, turning into a wicked parody of what a human face was supposed to look like.

The corpse's hands shot up with impossible speed, grabbing the blades of Sunny's and Saint's swords. The pristine white jade of the Sin of Solace seemed to warp under immense pressure.

Sunny suddenly felt cold.

'Not good…'

Chapter-1209: No Way Out

The Sin of Solace was a Transcendent Memory, and one that had an enchantment enhancing the material of the blade, at that. And yet, as soon as the creature grabbed the white jade, Sunny felt that it was moments away from breaking.

He had been planning to deliver the follow-up strike while augmenting the cursed sword with all five of his shadows, but it felt like if he did, there would be no sword for him to augment.

Cursing, Sunny hurriedly dismissed the jade blade and staggered back.

At the same time, Master Xu moved, and Saint was suddenly flying back. She hit the wall of the chamber with a deafening boom, shattering the black stones and creating a deep crater. White sand flowed from the cracks, falling on her broken armor.

A split second later, Jet brought her glaive down on the harrowing creature. Its ghostly blade passed through the abomination's dead flesh unimpeded, cutting straight into its soul… then, a net of black cracks spread through the enchanted steel, and it exploded into countless fragments. Startled, Soul Reaper lost her balance.

Seishan's delicate hands were like demonic claws, easily slicing through the creature's neck.

But the creature was still smiling.

The wound on its chest that the Sin of Solace had left behind had already closed. The deep cut delivered by Saint's sword was gone, too. As Sunny, Jet, and Seishan watched in horror, the mangled neck of Master Xu rippled and healed, with not a speck left on his skin.

"W—what…"

Seishan's voice suddenly sounded small.

At the same time, she sent Sunny a tense mental message:

[What do we do?]

He was the one who had informed her about the nature of the newcomer, so Seishan must have hoped that Sunny knew something about how to deal with the creature.

However, he did not. He only knew that fighting it was suicidal.

Sunny did not hesitate at all. Dismissing Saint, he dashed back and shouted:

"Run!"

In the next moment, the whirlwind of sparks filling the chamber finally coalesced into a lumbering, monstrous figure. A bestial hand exploded forward, swatting Master Xu aside and slamming him against the wall.

No matter how strong the creature was, its mass remained the same as that of the possessed corpse. So, even if its power was great and terrible, it was not impossible to overcome.

At least for a few moments.

And that was exactly what the Echo of Saint Dire Fang Sunny had summoned was supposed to buy them. The body of the towering beast occupied almost half of the underground chamber, scraping the ceiling with its head. One arm was extended forward, pushing the abomination into the cracked stones, while the other was already flying to deliver a devastating strike.

…Sunny doubted that the Echo would be able to accomplish much, though.

'What the hell… I actually managed to receive the Echo of a mighty Saint. A Saint, damn it! But it's barely enough to slow the enemy down for a moment…'

The Nightmare Desert was veiled in darkness, and darkness meant death. However, being trapped in the small underground chamber with the harrowing creature also meant death.

They could either remain and try to fight, or escape and try to survive the ancient battlefield. Both choices were equally fatal, but at least the latter would kill them a few seconds, or maybe even minutes, later.

"Hurry!"

Jet was the first one to jump up, grab the edges of the narrow fissure, and climb into the narrow crawlway. Her figure disappeared from sight, and Seishan instantly followed.

Without wasting any time, Sunny stepped through the shadows and appeared above ground, just in time to grab Jet's hand and help her climb out of the fissure.

The roar of the eternal battle, which had been muted by the breadth of stone, assaulted them like a storm.

Looking out of the ruin, Sunny paled.

Under the ghostly starlight, legions of the ancient dead were fighting each other. There was no skin or flesh left on their perfectly black bones… some of the dead resembled humans, some were like giants, and some were too monstrous and alien to describe with words.

However, all of them were terrifyingly powerful.

It was strange to see that the world had not been destroyed by the dreadful fury of their battle. How was a fragile human supposed to survive that cataclysmic clash?

'We… we are supposed to go through… that?'

Seishan had just climbed out of the fissure and stopped, staring at the scene of the harrowing battle. Her silken grey skin suddenly seemed darker.

Jet looked at the desert beyond the ruin, then at the hole they had

just climbed out of. Just at that moment, the whole structure shuddered, as if something was pushing against the black stones from below.

And a second later...

The Spell whispered into Sunny's ears:

[Your Echo has been destroyed.]

He staggered and gritted his teeth.

'Just… just like that?'

Sunny knew that the Echo of Dire Fang would not be able to defeat the harrowing creature, but still… he had not expected it to be destroyed in mere seconds.

He had just gotten that Echo. And now, it was gone.

Just what kind of horror was wearing the body of Master Xu?

…No matter what it was, the three of them were not capable of fighting it.

Even if Dire Fang himself had been here — or all the other Saints of the great clans — Sunny was not sure that the abomination could have been stopped.

Summoning Nightmare, he shouted to Jet and Seishan:

"Get on!"

Soul Reaper stared at him for a split second.

"But… but I still don't know how to ride a horse!"

Sunny was already running away.

"Figure it out, if you want to live!"

A moment later, both Jet and Seishan climbed onto Nightmare. The black steed instantly rushed away from the narrow fissure in the

stone floor.

Sunny was just a step or two ahead, turning into a swift shadow.

Together, the four of them flew out of the ruin…

And plunged into the dreadful havoc of the eternal battle.

Chapter-1210: Dead Soldiers

Nightmare flew through the battlefield where the servants of dead deities fought against each other, unable to resolve their ancient grudge even after thousands of years had passed. All around the galloping steed, giants made of black bones clashed with murderous fury.

Each strike of a rusted blade, each blow of a vicious claw, each snap of crushing jaws produced powerful shockwaves that stirred the white sand and made it seem as if the world was on the verge of collapsing. Angry sparks flew into the air, and a cacophonous clangor filled the dark sky.

'Crazy, crazy… this is crazy!'

Sunny was in the form of a shadow, gliding across the sand in front of Nightmare. He was serving as a guide, and the black stallion followed, carrying Jet and Seishan.

Sunny's mind was in overdrive, absorbing every minute detail of what was happening around them. He had to find a way to avoid the ancient wraiths and slip between them, somehow, while not being destroyed by their destructive wrath.

It was not easy… no, it was almost impossible. His only saving grace was that the dead did not seem to pay them any attention.

Still, just the aftershocks of their dreadful attacks were enough to obliterate a puny Ascended like Sunny.

'Damn it all!'

As they moved away from the ruin, Sunny saw…

A black skeleton easily parting the night sky with its obsidian sword.

The abominable bone behemoth that had been attacking the dead swordsman shuddered and collapsed, making the whole desert shake. Its mountain-like skeleton, almost a kilometer long, was cleanly cut in half along the spine.

A phalanx of ancient warriors marching forward to meet the charge of monstrous skeletal cavalry. The moment the two tides of black bones met, millions of stars were suddenly extinguished in the sky.

Two giants colliding above the dunes. One wielded a sword, while the other had iron shackles fastened around its wrists and ankles. The heavy chains rang as a gargantuan shackled hand shot forward, grabbing the colossal sword and flinging it away.

…Right in the direction of Sunny.

'Curse…'

The giant sword fell down just a few meters ahead of Sunny. However, it did not hit the sand — instead, the ancient weapon plunged into the shadows, disappearing into their bottomless embrace. The steel blade flashed past his intangible form like a wall of steel, barely missing Sunny himself.

'...We won't survive here for long.'

No one really knew what the Nightmare Desert had been before, but it was known that one of the last — or at least one of the fiercest — battles in the war between the daemons and the gods had taken place here.

Maybe the desert had already existed back then, or maybe this land had been turned into a desert by the battle.

No one knew why the fallen soldiers rose from the dead every night to continue the ferocious clash, either. Why did they continue to fight? What power had been unleashed here? Who was the architect of this nightmare?

All Sunny knew was that this was no place for the living. It was barely a place suited for the dead, even.

The weakest of the black skeletons were equal to powerful Corrupted creatures. The strongest… he did not even want to know. From what Nephis had said, the true horror was hidden in the heart of the desert, where the champions of the two armies had fought and died.

Sunny struggled to imagine what could be more horrific than the catastrophic clash happening around them, but he understood very well that they were not going to survive in the open.

They were like ants here. No one had stepped on them yet, but with how intense and harrowing the fighting between the dead was, it was only a matter of time — minutes, or maybe even seconds — before someone or something erased them from existence.

Just an echo of a distant strike was enough to annihilate them.

He had been planning to reach some other ruin. The location of the nearest structures was burned into his memory, but once they entered the battlefield, Sunny realized that it was of no use — the white dunes had shifted, and he had no marks to orient himself in the desert.

From the moment the three of them escaped the ruin, they were utterly lost.

The ground shook and split as a skeleton in rusted armor slammed its war hammer into the shield of a six-armed demon, and Nightmare almost stumbled. Baring its fangs, the black steed soared into a high jump, landed on the spine of a lumbering monster, galloped across it and landed on the other side, faster than wind.

Jet and Seishan held on for dear life.

Sunny was thrown out of the shadows and rolled on the sand, then jumped to the side, barely avoiding a titanic foot that descended from somewhere above like a black cliff.

The shockwave of its landing sent him stumbling back, and he tasted blood.

Dazed, he dove back into the shadows and flew toward Nightmare.

'We need to hide… we need to hide…'

Suddenly, Sunny saw a flash of light somewhere far away.

He couldn't really perceive colors while in the form of a shadow, but from the purity of the light, he knew that it had to be white.

Some distance away, obscured by countless fighting skeletons, a white halo was rising above the desert.

'There.'

Without spending too much time doubting himself, Sunny pivoted and flew toward the distant light. Nightmare followed, foam falling from his mouth.

All around them, the armies of the dead continued to annihilate each other, their battle slowly turning into a frenzied, apocalyptic scene of the end of the world.

Sunny knew that he was going to die. He was supposed to be dead already, even — the power of the clashing creatures was too great for mere mortals to survive.

And yet, it seemed that luck was on his side today.

Somehow, they were continuing to cling to their lives.

Eventually, they reached the source of the white light.

Hidden behind rolling white dunes, a stone edifice protruded from the sand. It was surrounded by a ring of white flame — and, strangely enough, none of the black skeletons dared to cross it.

Sunny did not risk plunging into the fire, either. Instead, he stepped through the shadows and appeared within the ring of flames. Nightmare simply jumped over them, landing nearby.

The ruin was in front of them, seemingly empty. There was no movement inside.

Feeling his heart start to beat faster, Sunny glanced at the white

flame, and then at the broken black stones. His breath grew heavy.

'...Neph?'

Chapter-1211: Until Dawn

The harrowing battle was still raging all around them, and Sunny struggled to suppress the feeling of primordial terror that threatened to overwhelm his reason. Thinking back to their mad dash across the dark battlefield, he felt his hands tremble.

How the hell did they survive?

He winced, and pushed the fear to the side. There was no time to be afraid.

Glancing at Jet and Seishan, Sunny nodded silently, and took a step toward the ruin.

No matter what awaited them inside, they couldn't remain in the open.

The ancient structure was in a sorry state. It had withstood thousands of years of heat and wind, but was nearly destroyed by whatever it was that had transpired here minutes ago.

The spherical dome was ruptured, and stone shards lay on the white sand, some covered in dancing flames. It was as though a powerful explosion had wrecked it from within, spreading fire and debris all around. A few chunks of broken stone were large and heavy enough to crush an armored vehicle.

Sunny extended his shadow sense as far as he could, but the black walls of the ruined structure were somehow blocking it.

Followed by Jet and Seishan, he carefully approached the hole in the dome's wrecked wall, lingered for a moment, and jumped inside.

The first thing that met them was the stench of burned flesh.

The ruin was much smaller than the one they had sheltered in before, and from the looks of it, there was no path to the underground portion of the structure. There was only this one spherical chamber, with its floor partially buried under the sand.

A blackened corpse lay in the middle of the round hall. It seemed human, but it was impossible to tell who that human had been — the corpse was burned too badly, and all its features were destroyed by the flame.

There was someone else in the chamber, too.

Sunny cursed and dashed forward, appearing near the motionless figure a split second later. Nephis was laying on the black stones, her armor almost destroyed, with her eyes closed. Wisps of white fire were escaping from the terrible wounds covering her body, and in the bleak light, her face looked pale and vulnerable.

'No, no, no…'

A moment later, a relieved sigh escaped from his lips.

She was alive, just unconscious. The wounds were already healing, too — just in these few short seconds, their edges had already grown closer.

Jet and Seishan slowly approached. Soul Reaper kneeled, studying the charred corpse.

After a while, Sunny forced himself to turn away from Neph and asked:

"Who is it? Can you tell?"

Jet hesitated, then shook her head.

"No… the body is too damaged. However, it gives me the creeps."

The three of them remained silent for a few moments, wondering what had happened here.

Had Nephis fought with another survivor? Or had there been another

creature like Ascended Xu?

Both possibilities were a little unnerving.

Eventually, Sunny shook his head.

"It doesn't matter. We need to destroy this corpse. Otherwise, there's a chance that it will rise and start talking to us again."

There were no objections.

After disposing of the corpse, the three of them gathered around the unconscious Nephis and sat in tense silence, waiting for dawn with terror gripping their hearts.

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In the morning, the sounds of the battle grew quiet. Sunny, who had not closed his eyes or allowed himself to relax for a single moment, sent one of his shadows to take a look outside.

He was utterly exhausted. Usually, an Ascended could go a long time without needing to rest, and Sunny had the benefit of wearing the Shroud of Dusk, as well… but in the past twenty-four hours, he had participated in a viciously intense battle, fought a Saint, traversed countless kilometers of the Nightmare Desert, and even survived the ruinous clash of the dead armies.

Not to mention facing the harrowing creature that wore the corpse of Master Xu.

Sunny was tired.

Outside, the desert was tranquil and pristine. The white dunes stretched as far as the eye could see, and there was no sign of the terrible forces that had fought across this hellish place just hours before.

The sand had swallowed everything.

It had been terribly cold in the desert during the night, but now that the sun had appeared above the horizon, the unbearable heat was

coming back.

He let out a hoarse sigh.

"They're gone."

The skeletal warriors were gone, but what about Master Xu? Had the creature followed them into the battlefield and got destroyed, or had it waited inside the ruin patiently, waiting for the sun to rise?

Was it coming for them now?

Sunny did not know.

Jet and Seishan were sitting back to back, while he was a couple steps away. Neph's head rested on his knees.

Summoning the Endless Spring, Sunny brought the beautiful glass bottle to her lips and poured out a little bit of water.

As it flowed into her mouth, Nephis stirred a little, and then coughed.

Her eyes opened, and she stared at him from below, slightly confused.

A slight smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"You're awake. Take it slow."

Nephis flinched, then sat up and grabbed the Endless Spring. She drank from it greedily, and then looked at Sunny.

White sparks danced in her eyes, as if agitated.

"How… how are you here?"

He shrugged.

"I told you that I would see you on the other side."

Sunny lingered for a few moments and scoffed.

"What? Don't look at me like that. To be honest, we saw the light of

your flames from afar, and rushed here, hoping to find shelter. If not for that, we'd be dead for sure."

Nephis glanced at Jet and Seishan. A small frown appeared on her face.

Then, she suddenly shuddered and turned around, staring at the spot where the charred corpse had been before.

Seishan finally spoke:

"We got rid of it. We… have encountered a creature that can possess corpses. So, keeping a dead body with us did not seem safe."

Nephis shivered.

"Yes… I… I have encountered such a creature, too."

Sunny remained silent for a while, wondering how was it that she had managed to kill the damn thing. Did it have something to do with her Ascended Ability, [Longing]? Or the nature of her Aspect in general?

The dead of the Nightmare Desert seemed unwilling to approach the white flames, too.

More importantly…

Was there more than one creature like the one they had fought? Or was it a creature capable of inhabiting multiple vessels at the same time?

His expression was grim.

"...Do you know what that thing was?"

Nephis hesitated for a few moments, then nodded.

"I'm not sure… but I think I do."

She grimaced, looked at her ruined armor, and raised one trembling hand.

"There were three Nightmare Gates, but only two Gate Guardians entered the waking world. The third… I think that it stayed behind in the Dream Realm."

Nephis grew quiet for a bit, and then added:

"To hunt us."

Chapter-1212: Pursuer

There was not much time to talk. If the Guardian of a Category Four Gate was really on their trail, then they needed to run.

Even if Nephis was wrong, the creature they had met was immeasurably strong. Considering its power and frightening level of intelligence, it had to be a Great Devil, at least. It was much more likely to be a Tyrant, or something even more terrifying.

Sunny had killed a Great Devil once… but that was not a real kill. The Spawn of the Vile Thieving Bird had been unborn, and weakend by thousands of years of neglect in the branches of the Soul Devouring Tree. More than that, Sunny had only survived that encounter because of his unique soul composition.

Only after meeting an actual Great Nightmare Creature did he realize how harrowing these beings truly were. The thing pretending to be Ascended Xu… was not even the real body of the abomination. Most likely, it was simply one of its manifestations.

But it had already been strong enough to shrug off all their attacks, severely wound Saint, and destroy a Transcendent Echo in mere seconds.

As for whether it was the Gate Guardian… logically speaking, that was impossible. Nightmare Creatures were compelled by the Seeds, unable to refuse their call. All they could do was be drawn by it and invade the waking world.

However, Sunny had already seen that the Great abominations were not as beholden to the rule of the Spell as the lesser creatures. One of them had actually used its power to forcefully widen the Nightmare Gate… if one of the Gate Guardians was capable of that, who was to say that a different one couldn't stay back to slaughter those humans who would flee to the Dream Realm?

'Hurry… we need to hurry…'

Mere minutes after Nephis regained consciousness, the four of them abandoned the ruined stone dome and ventured into the desert. For now, their destination was simple — they were fleeing in the direction opposite of where Master Xu had been seen last, as fast as they could.

As the four exhausted Masters fled across the desert, they learned about what had happened to Neph.

She had left the waking world soon after Sunny, and was drawn into the Nightmare Desert like the rest of them. Nephis fought against several Nightmare Creatures and eventually found another human — one of the Valor Ascended. Together, they sought and found a shelter to survive the approaching night.

There was something strange about that Ascended, though…

When she offered to heal his wounds, the man refused. His excuse was that she should save her essence for when they find more people.

But Nephis felt that he wanted to avoid touching her flames, which put her on guard.

It was only after the dead rose from the sand that the Ascended attacked her.

"The strangest thing was that… I don't think he wanted to kill me."

Sunny, Jet, and Seishan looked at her with confusion.

Nephis frowned.

"It was more like he wanted to… spread. Into me."

Her mouth twitched in revulsion.

"But nothing happened as a result. The creature seemed surprised, and that gave me a chance to unleash all my flames. I guess desperation fueled them with enough strength to burn it… then, I woke up with the three of you around me."

Sunny was suffering from the terrible heat, but at the same time, he felt cold.

'Was it trying to… Corrupt Neph?'

Humans did not know much about the Corruption. They just attributed the vile nature of the Nightmare Creatures to the Spell… but, really, the Corruption had existed long before Weaver created the Spell.

In fact, the ancient people had not used the term Nightmare Creatures — instead, they had simply called those creatures consumed by the vile darkness "the Corrupted".

Gods and daemons had fought against the Unknown in ancient times, and then, Awakened fought against the Corrupted during the Age of Heroes.

Creatures were not the only ones who could be Corrupted, either. Humans could succumb to the Corruption, as well.

'That is… troubling…'

There was something that troubled Sunny much more, though.

Both Master Xu and the Ascended that had attacked Nephis were strangely insistent on one thing — finding more humans.

So… could it be that the four of them had not really escaped the pursuit of the creature?

Could it be that it was letting them live in hopes that they would lead it to more survivors?

Suddenly, Sunny felt a shiver run down his spine.

He looked around, taking in the immaculately white landscape of the desert, almost expecting to see a dark figure to be following them from afar.

But, of course, if the corpse of Master Xu was indeed following them, it would not allow itself to be seen.

…Sunny did see something else, though.

There, in the vast azure sky… why was there a black dot there?

He stopped and looked up, gesturing for the others to prepare. There were still abominations traversing the desert on their way to the Nightmare Seeds, even if there were fewer of them than there had been yesterday. Some of them were of the winged variety, too… however, those creatures flew straight toward the Seeds, not paying attention to anything else.

The black dot, however, was moving in the wrong direction.

It was barreling straight at them.

Sunny, Nephis, Jet, and Seishan raised their weapons, ready to face the worst.

Less than a minute later, the dark figure fell from the sky and landed just a few meters away from them, raising a cloud of sand into the air.

Ivory armor… auburn hair… an infuriatingly handsome face… and magnetic green eyes that were shining with relief and concern.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"...Kai?"

His friend let out a long sigh and wiped the sweat off his brow.

Then, he smiled brightly, making Nephis, Seishan, and even Jet blush a little.

"Thank the gods! I've found you…"

Chapter-1213: Search & Rescue

Kai looked a bit tired and dehydrated, but other than that, he seemed fine. His Transcendent armor had originated from a fire-breathing dragon, after all — out of all them, he was probably capable of dealing with the lethal heat of the Nightmare Desert best.

Looking at his friend, Sunny felt profound relief.

He knew, of course, that the government force had been caught between the three Gates as well. They had not participated in the battle, and were protected by a Saint — so, their chances of escaping into the Dream Realm unscathed had been high.

However, knowing and seeing were two different things. Now that Sunny saw Kai, a huge burden had been lifted from his heart.

It was a bit bizarre, of course, to be happy about a friend becoming trapped in a Death Zone with very little hope of ever returning to the waking world… but considering the situation, one had to count their blessings.

Sunny exhaled slowly.

"Kai… you really know how to make an entrance, don't you? Where's Effie?"

The archer smiled.

"She's fine. We are with a sizable group of survivors… many people have entered the desert near each other and naturally bonded together. My farsight and flight Abilities make me the best person to search for survivors, so I've been scouring the desert. It's really fortunate that I stumbled on you first thing in the morning! Nephis, Seishan, Colonel Jet. It's good to see you all safe and sound."

'...Makes sense.'

Kai's Ability to see things from a ridiculous distance, and even peer straight through solid matter, made him uniquely suited for search and rescue missions… not to mention that he could traverse great distances swiftly with his extremely fast flight Ability.

Still, the archer must have fought more than one flying abomination and risked his life on several occasions to make sure that as many humans as possible survived.

'How very... Kai of him!'

Neph and Jet greeted the handsome young man warmly… even Seishan, who was usually reserved, spared him a small smile.

It was strange for Sunny to see someone interact with representatives of Clan Valor, Clan Song, and the government without making any distinction. But then again, Kai had no part in the conflict between the great clans.

More than that, even though Sunny kept forgetting it, the archer was the only member of Neph's cohort who had spent a considerable amount of time living in the Bright Castle under Gunlaug's rule.

While it was doubtful that Kai and Seishan had interacted a lot — their stations were too different — it was certain that they knew each other much better than the rest of them knew the daughter of Ki Song.

Kai was also close to several of her Handmaidens, so it was not unusual to see her treat him with friendliness.

At that moment, Seishan asked:

"The group of survivors… are there Saints among you?"

Although she tried to keep her voice emotionless, it was obvious that she wanted to know the fate of her sisters.

Kai's expression turned a little bleak.

He shook his head.

"Saint Cor was with us. He is the reason the group exists — without him, most of us would have perished in the sands. He was also the one who found a reliable shelter for us to survive the nights. However, after ensuring our basic safety, he took as many Ascended as he could and left for the waking world… East Antarctica must be in the throes of a terrible crisis, and his presence there is paramount.

We… we all understood."

Kai sighed.

"Other than that, we have not seen another Saint. Sir Madoc and Dire Fang perished on the battlefield, as for the other four… they have to be somewhere near, unless they too chose to return."

Seishan's beautiful eyes lost some of their glimmer. She nodded silently and grew quiet.

Jet, meanwhile, looked away and grimaced.

"That's the old man for you… he always has his priorities straight."

It was hard to tell whether Wake of Ruin's ruthlessly logical decision to abandon the survivors and return to where he could save the most lives gladdened or disappointed her. The two shared a close relationship, so it was not impossible to imagine that Soul Reaper had hoped to receive Saint Cor's help, or at least consideration.

Then again, Jet was not a person who relied on others to solve her problems. Perhaps she was simply happy to know that Wake of Ruin survived.

Sunny had more pressing questions to ask, though.

"Have you encountered the creature?"

Kai frowned in confusion.

"The creature? We have encountered many creatures. Which one are you talking about?"

Sunny and Nephis exchanged a glance.

"...There's a Great abomination hunting the survivors in the desert. It can possess dead bodies, and it is also smart enough to perfectly imitate human behavior — we barely survived encountering it."

Kai paled a little.

"Gods! In that case, I have to inform the others as soon as possible. Sadly, I have not only found survivors… I've found a few bodies, as well, some of them not too far from our camp. Luckily, none of them seemed to be moving. We have not faced that horror yet."

He frowned, then raised an eyebrow.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that, Sunny?"

Sunny lingered for a few long moments and let out a heavy sigh.

"You might not have faced it yet, true."

Nephis added evenly:

"...Or you might have faced it already. You just didn't know what you were facing."

Kai's expression grew ugly.

Sunny looked at the boundless expanse of pristine white dunes.

"It is really hard to tell that thing apart from real humans. So… how many survivors are in your group? How many of them had been with you from the very start, and how many joined recently?"

Feeling a cold shiver run down his spine, he hesitated for a few moments, and then asked:

"How many people did Wake of Ruin take with him back to the waking world?"

Chapter-1214: Source of Nightmares

"Move, monster!"

An Ascended of Clan Valor had fear in his eyes as he pushed Mordret in the back with the butt of his spear. Mordret had already been walking as fast as he could, so the forceful push made him stumble and fall.

The blistering white sand burned his mangled face.

He sighed, then struggled to stand up.

One of his eyes was gone, and he had only one hand left. His Reflections had all been destroyed. His body was in a sorry state…

Even though Mordret had managed to escape the rampage of the Great being, his luck in the Nightmare Desert was awful. Soon after entering it, he stumbled on the pursuing Gate Guardian, and after barely surviving that unfortunate encounter, a band of surviving Masters of Clan Valor ambushed and overpowered him.

He had failed to finish off his sister, too.

'A pity.'

Now, his arms were bound behind his back with enchanted shackles. Even if he wanted to abandon his original body, he was temporarily trapped within it… the heavy chains were probably not the tool Morgan had planned to imprison him with, but they too were forged by his father.

Getting out of the shackles was going to be troublesome. If anything, though, having only one hand left could help with that.

"Stand up!"

Mordret sighed in exasperation.

"I'm trying… really now, is this how you treat a prince of Valor?"

Instead of the answer, the Master angrily hit him in the ribs.

Mordret plopped back into the scorching sand.

Another voice resounded from somewhere above:

"Stop it! You're only slowing us down… the Skinwalker has to be drawing close. If we want to survive, we need to reach the Citadel as soon as possible."

Indeed, that was the only reason that the stragglers of Clan Valor had kept him alive — they wanted Mordret to show them the way to the Black Skull Citadel.

The Nightmare Desert was vast, but with the Echo mounts, the band of survivors had been able to traverse a great deal of distance in the past day. Their luck was also not too bad — the area where the Call had pulled them was not that far from the Citadel.

With Mordret's help, they managed to make it most of the way there.

The last stretch, however, had to be traversed on foot.

Someone pulled him to his feet. The woman was trying to appear calm, but he could feel her fear… the Ascended had encountered the Skinwalker, too. In fact, the ones with him now were simply those who had survived the encounter. They knew that death — or something much worse — was relentlessly pursuing them.

"Lead the way. Your life depends on reaching the Black Skull, too. Where is it?!"

Mordret lingered for a moment, then smiled.

"Don't worry. We're already close."

He walked forward, navigating between white dunes and ancient ruins.

After several hours of suffocating heat, they finally saw the giant black skull appear in the distance. The Masters froze for a moment, excitement burning in their eyes.

…Mordret, however, silently took a step back.

He shook his head.

These people asked him where the Citadel was, and he led them here.

However, they should have asked another question as well.

The question was really simple…

What had he done with the corpses of the Awakened inside the Black Skull Citadel?

The answer was that he had done nothing.

Nevertheless, human figures suddenly started emerging from inside the giant black skull. One, two, three… a dozen, two dozens… three…

Knight Shtad's headless corpse was also there, walking at the front.

The survivors wanted to escape the Skinwalker, but they had actually been marching toward their deaths all along.

'Time to run.'

Turning around, Mordret allowed his body to fall and roll down the slope of a tall white dune.

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In the end, Kai stayed with Sunny and the others. Together, they made their way through the desert, heading for the spot where he had left the other survivors.

The path was not easy. There were too many powerful Nightmare

Creatures around, and even though most of them were mesmerized by the call of the Seeds, some weren't, or at least not completely.

Luckily, none of the abominations they had to fight were of the Great Rank. Each of the five Masters was immensely powerful, too…

Still, it was a rough journey.

All of them were utterly exhausted, suffering from the inhuman conditions of the white desert, and under terrible mental strain because of the harrowing feeling of being pursued.

Nobody knew whether the corpse of Master Xu was on their trail or not… but just the possibility of meeting the creature again was enough to fill them with a suffocating sense of dread.

The abominations they fought were all powerful and dreadful, too.

Out of the five of them, Nephis seemed to be affected the least. However, she was struggling with her own burden.

Looking at the flawlessly white expanse of white dunes, she shook her head and sighed quietly.

"I never thought I would return here one day. Or, at least, so soon."

For them, this land was called the Nightmare Desert simply because it was the source of the Chain of Nightmares.

But for Nephis… for her, it was the source of her personal nightmares. She had never spoken about her time here in detail, but Sunny knew that it must have been a gruesome experience.

Gruesome enough that the proud and strong Changing Star had agreed to receive psychological counseling, even. This desert, and whatever she had experienced in the Second Nightmare, were not things one could easily forget.

'I can imagine… no, actually, I don't think I can.'

Sunny had only spent a day in the Nightmare Desert — and that was as a Master, in the company of other people. Yet the sight of endless

white dunes was already making him feel a hint of despair.

What would it have been like, to get lost in this cursed land alone, as a powerless Sleeper?

"We're getting close!"

Kai's voice distracted him from the heavy thoughts.

In front of them, the sand receded a little, and five strangely shaped metal towers could be seen protruding from it, arranged in a semicircle. The sunlight was reflecting on the polished metal, making it even more blinding.

Each tower had a different height, with the shortest of them being at least several dozen meters tall.

Sunny stared at them for a few moments before realizing what the towers were — they were the tips of five fingers belonging to a colossal steel gauntlet.

The gauntlet itself was buried under sand.

He did not know what creature could have worn the gauntlet, and where the rest of it was... and, right now, Sunny did not care.

All he cared about was that the towers were hollow, and there was shade inside.

'There are also people inside.'

Sunny's expression turned grim as he followed Kai toward the temporary camp of the survivors.

'...It'll be good if there are only people.'

Chapter-1215: Steel Tower

There were lookouts hiding in the shadows of the five towers. Of course, Sunny had no trouble noticing them — all of them were Masters, and in a very rough shape. Just like Sunny, they had gone from participating in a bloody battle to entering the Nightmare Desert and being forced to fight for their lives without a real opportunity to rest.

Masters of the great clan Valor, great clan Song, and the government were working together without a second thought. Even though some of the wounds they bore had been delivered by the other humans in the group, no one thought about continuing the feud. All conflict had been forgotten in the face of the ruthless desert.

'How sweet.'

Indeed, the Spell had a way of bringing people together.

...It also had a way of bringing Nightmare Creatures and people together.

As soon as their party of five entered one of the steel fingers through a narrow crack, Sunny's expression darkened.

There were about twenty humans sheltered in the cool darkness of the hollow tower. Some looked like they had just returned from exploring the dunes, while others were busy with various tasks — preparing food, refining the carcasses of dead abominations into valuable materials, drawing maps of the surrounding area…

Even though Wake of Ruin had abandoned the group, the Ascended did not seem willing to give up on their survival.

Perhaps it was because of a certain person who had taken charge and driven them forward.

'So she survived, too…'

Morgan had lost her intricate plate armor, and wore a black tunic. The scarlet cloak was wrapped around her shoulders, falling to the ground like a waterfall of blood.

The Princess of War seemed tired and reserved. There were no wounds on her body, but the usual sharpness of her vermilion eyes was strangely dulled. She was standing in the center of the hollow tower, listening to the reports of the scouts.

As the five of them entered, Morgan looked up from a crude leather map and glanced in their direction with a distant expression. Then, her eyes shimmered.

"...My sister is alive."

Her voice was hoarse and emotionless.

The scouts were confused for a moment, then turned around. Their faces grew excited.

"Lady Changing Star!"

"It's…"

However, the words were drowned out by a happy shout:

"Doofus! Princess!"

A tall and robust figure that seemed to have been cast of lustrous steel walked over to them with ginger steps and subjected Sunny to an earth-shaking shoulder pat.

"You guys made it!"

With that, Effie grinned, and suddenly grabbed startled Nephis into a tight hug.

"Wha… uh… Effie, I can't breathe…"

The huntress let go of Neph and looked at the two of them with

sparks dancing in her eyes.

"Thank the gods. You are Masters, after all! I was afraid that the two of you pale apparitions would be all red and burned by the time you got here..."

Usually, Sunny would have reacted in a more friendly manner, but right now, he did not pay Effie a lot of attention.

Instead, he was carefully studying the other Ascended gathered in the finger of the titanic gauntlet.

His expression was neutral.

His mind, however...

'Damnation.'

Under Sunny's relaxed gaze, the souls of the Ascended shone with bright radiance.

However, not all of them.

Some were hiding a boundless expanse of vile, virulent darkness… they were infected by the cancerous growth of Corruption.

Out of the twenty Masters here, seven were no Masters at all.

They were all vessels of the same creature that had worn the skin of Ascended Xu as a disguise.

'...We are all going to die, aren't we?'

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then looked at Effie.

"We are alright, but what about you? To be honest, I'm a little surprised… that you haven't eaten all these people yet. I mean, I know your appetites. And is it just me, or have you gained weight?"

Time. He had to stall for time.

Effie blinked a couple of times and smiled softly… which would have made Sunny shiver in any other situation.

"Keep talking. I'll eat you first."

Accompanied by her, they walked toward Morgan. As they did, the atmosphere in the hollow tower suddenly grew a little colder.

"Song Seishan."

Morgan's voice was even.

Seishan met her piercing gaze with the grace of a person who had survived a decade of hell on the Forgotten Shore. Her reply was similarly composed:

"Morgan."

The two stared at each other with frightening intensity.

Kai coughed and shifted from one leg to another. Sunny hesitated, then sent him a mental message:

[Why didn't you tell us that Morgan was here?]

The archer looked at him and shrugged helplessly.

[She must have arrived after I left to search for more survivors. She wasn't here in the morning… there won't be trouble, right? The two of them will see reason… surely…]

A gust of wind crashed into the hollow tower, and the ancient metal groaned.

Morgan shook her head.

"We'll put our quarrel aside, for the time being. Let's return to the waking world before doing anything rash."

Seishan slowly nodded.

"Agreed."

She didn't seem to be flustered at the prospect of facing the Princess of War in combat. Sunny wasn't entirely sure how powerful Seishan was, currently — after all, she had Ascended later than most of them.

On the other hand, she was older and had accumulated much more experience in the Dark City.

It didn't matter, though.

Last night, the cumulative power of Seishan, Sunny, Jet, and Saint had been barely enough to slow down just one vessel of the Gate Guardian for a few moments.

And now, they were surrounded by seven of them.

Morgan seemed to have no idea of how doomed they all were… which was not surprising. In fact, it was Sunny and Jet who were freaks capable of peering through the disguise of a Great abomination. Both of their Aspects were one-of-a-kind and exceedingly rare — it would be quite improbable to assume that anyone else in the Nightmare Desert possessed similar capabilities.

Maybe Cassie did… but she was not here.

Sunny felt his chest grow tight as he thought about the blind girl.

Where was she now? Had she managed to escape the slaughter?

Morgan, meanwhile, looked at Nephis.

"I must congratulate you, sister. Oh, and Master Sunless, of course. Killing Dire Fang… it was a pleasant surprise. I should think about how to reward you."

She turned to Sunny, remained silent for a moment, and then suddenly smiled.

"...I do hope you won't ask to fight me again, though, Master Sunless. The environment here is not quite as dreamlike as the last time I had to reward you."

As Nephis, Seishan, Effie, and Jet gave Sunny strange looks, he cleared his throat and forced out a smile.

"No, no. I wouldn't dare to request something untoward… again…"

At the same time, he used the Blessing of Dusk to speak with Morgan silently:

Smiling pleasantly, he said:

[Do as I say if you don't want to die.]

Chapter-1216: On the Run

'Crap, crap, crap…'

Sunny did not know what the creature pursuing them was, exactly. He had hoped that the possessed corpses were not the vessels of a single being, but instead separate abominations, akin to minions of a tyrant… but even if they were, there was obviously a way for them to share information.

He knew it because his hopes were being crushed right in front of his eyes.

If there was no way for the puppets of the Gate Guardian to share knowledge, then he could have pretended to be oblivious to their presence and bought some time. But the seven taken Masters were all seemingly aware that Sunny could tell what they were.

They slowly started to move. At first, their movements seemed inconspicuous, but it quickly became apparent that they were encircling those Ascended who remained human.

There were eerily human smiles brightening their faces.

On one side, there were seven possessed corpses with the power of a Great abomination.

On the other side, there were Sunny, Nephis, Kai, Effie, Jet, Seishan, Morgan, and eleven more unaffected Masters.

Morgan had three Transcendent Echoes left. Seishan had one.

Sunny had Saint and Nightmare.

…And Imp.

In fact, the scrawny goblin was the linchpin of their survival.

[Get everyone to come closer.]

Sunny had already explained the situation to Morgan and coordinated with the rest of his allies. Their only chance to survive was to run… but escaping from the ring of possessed corpses seemed impossible.

Nevertheless, they had to try.

Knowing what to do, Morgan calmly looked at the eleven Ascended who had not been taken by the Gate Guardian yet and called:

"You there! Come here. I have questions about our rations and water reserve… you, too. How many tents can we make from that hide?"

The Masters left what they had been doing and walked over. By that time, even they started to notice that something strange was going on.

One group of people was standing in the center of the hollow tower. The other group had spread out, surrounding them.

The ancient steel was groaning as it was assaulted by the wind.

'That is all. There are also three Ascended outside… but only two of them are human.'

"Lady Morgan? What, uh… what is going on?"

The human Masters seemed confused.

Meanwhile, the other humans were slowly shifting, assembling into a loose battle formation. Their weapons were already in their hands.

Sunny was the only one who remained motionless.

What was the point of trying to fight seven Great abominations?

'It's almost time… I just need a few seconds!'

Morgan looked heavily at her subordinates, then said evenly:

"Come closer."

They glanced at each other, then hesitantly took a few steps forward.

At the same time…

The smiling corpses took a step forward, too.

"Kai, now!"

Sunny's shout was drowned out by the groan of twisting metal.

And then, that groan was drowned out by Kai's voice.

The handsome archer only spoke one word, but it enveloped the space within the hollow tower entirely, echoing in its dark expanse:

"Stop."

'Argh… hell…'

Sunny had never been on the receiving end of Kai's Ascended Ability — or rather, he had never been the subject of its negative influence. His friend usually used the power of his voice to inspire soldiers and ignite their desire to fight, win, and survive.

But that was not the only thing he could do.

Nightingale's true power was to compel living things and bend them to his will.

When Kai had commanded everyone to stop, it was as though the world itself froze.

Sunny was still able to move thanks to his impressively high mental defense, but it was as though a mountain had fallen on him… it was not physical weight, though. Rather, it was incredibly hard to remember why he wanted to move, in the first place.

With some effort, he managed.

The others were similarly affected, resisting the command with varying degrees of success.

Even the seven corpses stumbled. However, they shook off the effects

of the command almost instantly… still, it bought Sunny the couple seconds he needed.

Because at that moment, the whole tower suddenly shuddered…

And collapsed.

There was a deep groan of tearing metal, a shrill screeching noise, and then wind and light flooded the interior of the steel finger.

That was because Imp had gnawed through the outer layers of the tower, of course, going most of the way around it.

Sunny had summoned the gluttonous goblin immediately after noticing the lookouts of the survivor group. While he was greeting Effie, talking to Morgan, informing her of danger, and observing the seven vessels of the Gate Guardian slowly surrounding them, the Ravenous Fiend was busy stealthily eating through the exterior of the steel finger.

And just then, the tower finally couldn't support its weight and toppled.

The cool shade filling its interior was instantly torn apart by blinding sunlight.

…But plenty of shadows remained.

Calling upon them, Sunny instantly manifested dozens of dark tentacles. Some of them wrapped themselves around the bodies of those corpses that had not been buried under countless tons of steel, only to be instantly destroyed.

This was just a distraction, though.

The rest of the shadow tentacles grabbed the humans, and unceremoniously tossed them out of the way of falling metal, into the merciless heat of the desert.

At the same time, a whirlwind of sparks manifested into Transcendent Echoes, who threw themselves at the abominations. Everyone used their own means to slow the enemy down.

There were screams, there was noise. There was an explosion of white flame, and the sharp sound of the air being cut by countless blades. Blood spilled.

Falling onto the white sand, Sunny rolled and jumped to his feet.

"Run!"

Most of them had made it out of the tower, but five out of the eleven Ascended that Morgan had called were nowhere to be seen.

The white dunes around them trembled, and then exploded, and a vast cloud of sand covered everything in sight.

Kai held Effie's hand as he soared into the air.

Nightmare appeared out of the darkness, rushing toward Jet.

Morgan had her own mount, which looked like a horned destrier made of steel.

…Sunny found himself near Nephis.

Without thinking about what he was doing, he grabbed her tightly…

And stepped through the shadows.

An instant later, the two of them appeared a few kilometers away, in the shadow of a tall dune.

He had pulled her with him into Shadow Step.

Sunny stared at Nephis with a startled expression, and she looked at him with wide eyes.

"What… what was that?"

He opened his mouth, then froze for a moment.

"That, uh… I just thought that it might work. What would you know? It did."

Sunny couldn't bring other living things with him when he stepped

through the shadows, but his Aspect had already shown that it treated Nephis as an extension of him in certain instances. Or rather… it was more like it treated Sunny as an extension of Nephis.

They were connected by Shadow Bond, which meant that their souls were bound together. Sunny didn't have to like it…

But it would be foolish not to use it.

Nephis looked at him for a moment, then nodded.

"Okay."

She looked at him some more and added:

"You can let go of me now."

Sunny smiled crookedly.

"Oh, but I really can't."

Just then, a black steed jumped over the dune and rushed down its slope. Jet shouted from Nightmare's back as they flashed past them:

"Move! They're following!"

Burning through his essence, Sunny sighed, and then pulled Nephis back into the shadows.

Chapter-1217: Bone Tired

They were on the run. The Nightmare Desert welcomed them with immaculate purity and lethal heat, the white dunes stretching toward the distant horizon — the merciless sun burned in the azure sky like an incinerating well of molten silver, and a harrowing enemy was following them across the sands like an inescapable omen of torturous death.

'...I'm tired.'

Sunny was bone tired. He had long exhausted his reserves of essence, leaving just enough of it untouched to not be helpless in a fight. Not that fighting the Gate Guardian was a real option… Nephis might have destroyed one of its vessels, but it had almost killed her. The rest of them did not possess Aspects that countered the creature's powers, either.

Fighting the puppets of the Great abomination meant giving up on life — or, much worse, their very humanity.

Blindly advancing deeper into the desert was not much better.

There was a terrible foe pursuing the battered group of survivors, but there were also countless dangers ahead of them. The dunes hid all kinds of Nightmare Creatures, and several people had already been killed in the short, but brutal and unavoidable skirmishes with the wandering abominations.

None of those abominations had been weaker than Corrupted. The people fighting them were all tired, wounded, and in a desperate hurry, as well.

There were only thirteen of them left.

Looking at the exhausted survivors, Sunny wondered how many of

them would live to see nightfall.

How many would survive until dawn?

The mighty Masters were already resembling walking corpses. They were moving forward with grave expressions, suffering silently as the terrible heat pressed them into the ground. Their hair and armor were covered in sand. Those with Echo mounts were in the vanguard, those without shakily followed behind.

Sunny and Kai were serving as the scouts of the party. Morgan, Nephis, Jet, Effie, and Seishan were the main strike force… the rest were just trying to stay alive.

Worst of all…

Everyone knew that it was pointless.

Even more disheartening than the sea of abominations ahead of them and the Great horror pursuing them was the fact that the party was aimless. They had no clear goal, just a stubborn hope to survive.

Before, these people had the same plan as Sunny — reach the Black Skull and escape into the waking world. Now that they knew what was out there in the pristine white purgatory of the Nightmare Desert, though, the Citadel had become the source of their fears.

That was because Mordret had slaughtered every Awakened sent there by Clan Valor. And the corpses he had left behind were the perfect vessels for the Gate Guardian.

One Great abomination was terrifying, while seven of them were beyond the concept of fear. What about dozens, then? The Citadel that the survivors had been putting their hope into had turned out to be the gates of hell.

So, there was nowhere for them to go anymore.

Then why continue forward at all?

For now, they walked out of fear and out of a growing sense of panicked urgency. They continued forward because there was a

creature of pure dread following them from behind.

Escape the pursuit, find a place to wait out the night. They would come up with a solution later.

'Ah… I'm really tired.'

Sunny was walking with Nephis as his shadows scouted the path ahead. One of them was gliding across the dunes side by side with the swift shadow of Kai, who flew high above. There was no real need for both Sunny and Kai to keep an eye on the same stretch of the desert, but this way, Sunny was able to reach him with the Blessing of Dusk.

[Up ahead, behind the crooked dune.]

[...Yeah. I sense it.]

A tall figure in an intricate suit of onyx armor emerged from the shadow. A few moments later, two arrows pierced the flesh of a Nightmare Creature that was slumbering in the shade of the tall dune. The creature exploded forward in a fury of sharp fangs and claws, its roar spreading far and wide across the desert.

By the time it reached Saint, it was shaking under the weight of numerous arrows. One more fell from the sky like lightning — the abominations swayed and toppled, falling heavily into the sand.

[One more for me.]

Sunny smiled bleakly.

[You have a better vantage point, cheater.]

Then, the smile slowly disappeared from his face.

Accompanied by one of Sunny's shadows, Kai was far ahead of the party. Two more shadows kept to the left and right of the survivors, separated from them by several kilometers of white sand.

One more was far behind them.

And it was that one who noticed a dark silhouette appear from behind the crest of a towering dune.

The figure froze for a moment, then turned and stared directly at the shadow.

Sunny shuddered.

'The Gate Guardian…'

His dry lips cracked as he shouted:

"It's coming! Move!"

The exhausted Masters paled and gritted their teeth. Then, they gathered all the strength they had left and dashed forward, running as fast as they could.

The incandescent sun was drowning the world in blinding light and immolating heat.

As the shadow that had noticed the pursuer flew away, another figure crested a dune several hundred meters away from it.

And then, another.

'Damn it…'

Sunny ran, carefully considering his options.

He felt… aggrieved.

He felt indignant.

He was appalled at the fact that he had been reduced to the state of only being able to run away and hide, like a frightened rat.

But that was, and had always been, reality.

Humans were small and weak in the world of the Nightmare Spell.

Even humans like Sunny, conquerors of Nightmares and slayers of titans, were no more than mice.

'I'm tired… I'm tired... I'm tired of being powerless. I'm tired of being weak. I want to be stronger… much stronger... so much more...'

Overcome by a deep, painful longing, Sunny gritted his teeth and ran.

Chapter-1218: Hunted

There were thirteen humans desperately trying to escape the pursuit of the Great abomination.

Or rather, there had been.

Without anyone noticing the reason, one of the Masters stumbled and fell. No one had attacked her, and the pursuing corpses were still out of sight. The woman grabbed her neck and screamed.

A moment later, she rose with a strange smile on her lips.

Where a radiant soul core had been, there was now nothing but spreading darkness.

'Curse it all…'

Sunny commanded the sole shadow that had remained with him to wrap itself around his body, and ran.

Someone's hoarse shout reached his ears:

"S—split up!"

'No! You fools…'

The logic of that desperate call was simple and not without reason. There were seven vessels of the Gate Guardian — eight, now — and twelve surviving humans. If they escaped in different directions, some of them would have a chance to survive.

But it was pointless to apply logic to Great abominations. These beings existed outside any kind of human rationale, outside reason. Only by staying together and helping each other would the survivors have a chance to preserve their lives, no matter how small.

It was already too late to try and explain that to the frightened Masters, though.

While Morgan, Seishan, and the members of Neph's cohort chose to stay close to each other, the other five Ascended turned and ran in different directions.

Not a second later, a dark blur intercepted one of them, and a fountain of blood shot into the air.

Up ahead, Morgan looked back from the saddle of her steel mount and cursed. Then, she hesitated for a moment and jumped off its tall back. The Echo then galloped in the direction of the approaching corpses, lowering its horned head.

As a whirlwind of scarlet sparks rose around her, Seishan stopped and turned around. Her exquisitely beautiful face was cold and somber.

The two of them looked at each other, and then, Seishan slowly raised her hands.

'What are they doing?'

Jet was riding Nightmare, so she was far ahead of the rest of them. Effie was maybe the fastest runner among the group of survivors, so she was ahead of the pursuers, as well.

Only Sunny and Nephis were falling behind.

As they ran, Neph's eyes shone with white radiance. She briefly touched Sunny's shoulder, and he felt the nurturing warmth of her flames pour into his soul and body. Instantly, their speed increased.

It was still not enough, though.

Through the shadows, Sunny felt something swift flying toward him from behind. The shadows he had sent to scout were still moments away from reaching him… he knew that he had to use some of his remaining essence and dodge the attack through Shadow Step.

Before he could, however, Seishan outstretched her hands, bringing

her thumbs and index fingers together in a perfect triangle. Then, a drop of dark crimson liquid suddenly materialized in the air within the triangle.

Looking at it, Sunny suddenly felt a hint of unknown awe brush against his heart.

The drop of blood swirled, and then, the whole world was suddenly painted in shades of red.

'What… what is this?'

Sunny did not know what the daughter of the Queen of Worms was doing, but he felt as if something vast and terrifying silently moved past him, and then enveloped the white sands of the desert.

There were screams.

The creature lunging at him suddenly slowed down and veered off, then grew still.

He didn't dare turn around.

As Sunny and Nephis reached Seishan, the hurricane of scarlet sparks raging around Morgan formed into scores of beautifully forged swords. The swords trembled slightly, hovering in the air, and then suddenly shot forward like an avalanche of steel.

The shadows arrived, wrapping themselves around Sunny and Nephis.

Saint was also there, standing on a white dune as she drew her bow.

Behind them, a cacophony of noise exploded, and the sand shifted. Several dunes collapsed, with a white cloud rising into the air.

They ran.

***

"Hurry up!"

"Damn it all… that thing is still behind us…"

"Stop! Look there..."

Sunny cursed as he threw himself to the ground, hitting the sand to slow down.

The sun was setting, and they were still running as fast as they could. His exhaustion had long transformed into something much more dire and primal. Sunny had not even known that an Ascended body could be that drained of… everything.

Neither the augmentation of the burning shadows nor the tenacious nature of Blood Weave were enough to overcome that terrible fatigue anymore.

Even though he had to stop for a dreadful reason, he still welcomed the short moment of falling onto the sand.

A split second later, though, Sunny had to push his battered body into a roll and jump back to his feet.

'Curses…'

Miraculously, they had managed to escape all but one of the taken corpses. The last one still pursued them, never letting the group — now reduced to only seven people — stop and rest for even a minute.

At some point, the heat and the scorching sand had transformed into an lethal threat of their own.

And yet, they persisted… until now.

That was because a second corpse suddenly appeared out of nowhere, barring their path.

The figure standing in front of them was not one of the original seven abominations, though… instead, it was a familiar face.

Sunny let out a tired sigh.

'So he's here, as well…'

Master Xu was staring at them with an eerie smile.

Nephis, Effie, Jet, Morgan, Seishan, Kai, and Sunny… the seven of them had nowhere else to run. One vessel of the Gate Guardian was behind them, and the other was in front of them.

The night was approaching.

"What do we do?"

Kai's voice sounded tense and tired. He could still escape, of course… maybe. The Great being approaching them had to have ways of dealing with flying prey.

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, then outstretched his hand and summoned the Sin of Solace.

What else was there to do?

He commanded all but one of his shadows to wrap themselves around the white jade of the cursed blade, turning it perfectly black.

"...Kill the bastards."

They had to kill them or die... kill them and die, if need be. Either way worked.

It was better than turning into the skin costumes of the Gate Guardian themselves, anyway.

But Sunny... Sunny wanted to live.

Chapter-1219: Silver Sun

'Think, think, think…'

They had a very small chance of coming out of this fight alive. However, there was always hope, no matter how impossible the odds.

What was hope? Hope was a desire… perhaps the paramount desire. A yearning so powerful and resilient that it could hardly be vanquished or destroyed. The darkest and most inescapable despair could not conquer hope. Even demons in hell hoped to reach heaven one day.

They longed to see their deepest desires come true, and that longing alone could make them continue suffering and struggling instead of searching for solace in the peaceful embrace of death.

Life was war, after all.

Hope… desire… it was a powerful thing.

'Longing.'

Sunny glanced at Nephis, considering. She was the only one among them capable of dealing permanent damage to the vessels of the Gate Guardian. Her soul flame seemed to be like poison to the abominable creature — the wounds Sunny and the others had dealt to the corpse of Master Xu would instantly heal, but the puppet that had attacked Neph was burned to death by it.

A hurricane of thoughts flashed through his mind in a split second.

'She's our best chance.'

If they could survive today, it would be through the power of longing that the Light Bringer Aspect seemed to contain. The soul flame...

Pure, cruel, and incorruptible.

There was no time to think. Starting to move, Sunny connected the minds of the seven Masters together through the Blessing of Dusk.

[We need to destroy the creature in front of us before the one behind catches up. There is no other way — we might not even be able to fight one, so fighting two at the same time is a death sentence. The six of us will restrain it. Nephis will kill it. Go!]

They had maybe a handful of seconds before the pursuer showed up. The seven of them had to slay a Great abomination before that happened.

Usually, it would have been impossible to even deal minor damage to a creature two whole Ranks above their own level. Sunny had failed to pierce the skin of the first Fallen abominations he met as a Sleeper, after all… nevertheless, that abomination died in the end.

The gap between Ranks was vast, but it was not absolute. There was nothing indestructible in the world, and even the gods were dead. Everyone — and everything — was vulnerable to something.

None of them were ordinary Masters, and each had accumulated many more tools and killing implements than any Sleeper could ever possess. Better yet, there was someone among them whose Aspect countered the powers of the Gate Guardian.

Sunny knew that he had to use the best weapon at his disposal to destroy the enemy.

Right now, his best weapon was not the Sin of Solace.

It was Nephis.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny dashed forward. At the same time, all his shadows left him and embraced her, turning the hue of her white flame colder and more menacing. She had trusted him to kill Dire Fang… now, Sunny was going to trust Nephis to kill the vessel of the Gate Guardian barring their path.

As soon as the shadows slid from the blade of the Sin of Solace, the

vague figure standing near him suddenly grew more blurry, and clicked its tongue in disappointment.

"Ah. And things were just getting fun."

Sunny ignored it.

There was no need to discuss anything — everyone knew what they had to do. All seven of them lunged at Master Xu.

It was hard to attack a single target without getting in each other's way. And yet, they managed.

A black arrow pierced one of his eyes, followed by a white one that destroyed the other. The corpse's head jerked back.

At the same time, an iron rain of shurikens shredded its chest and right shoulder, almost severing the entire arm. Jet knew that her power was not enough to damage the creature's soul — abandoning her most feared Ability, she aimed to reduce the creature's mobility instead.

Effie's Transcendent spear shot toward one of Master Xu's knees, while Morgan's sword flew at another with lightning-fast speed.

Seishan's claws sank into his left shoulder and elbow, tearing both joints apart.

The Sin of Solace hissed through the air as it fell on the creature's head.

Their task was to slow the Gate Guardian down and allow Nephis to deliver the fatal strike.

But…

As the two arrows exploded from the back of Master Xu's head in a fountain of blood and brain matter, his eyes had already restored themselves, burning with malice and glee.

The shurikens fell into the sand as the flesh mangled by them rippled and was immaculately restored.

The corpse took half a step, and both Effie's spear and Morgan's sword somehow missed.

Seishan's eyes widened.

Sunny cursed under his breath.

"Damna…"

The corpse exploded forward.

Effie's shield shattered as she was thrown back. Seishan fell down, sharp shards of bone protruding from her broken arms. Morgan blocked with her sword, but the sword burst into countless steel shards. She was sent flying in a whirlwind of scarlet sparks and blood.

Sunny barely avoided having his neck sliced open by falling into the shadows.

The creature… refused to be slowed down.

And Nephis was now alone, face-to-face with it.

'...tion!'

Her radiant sword shot forward with unimaginable speed, its vicious blow enhanced by the full force of the soul flame and the five shadows.

However…

Master Xu simply raised his hand, catching the incandescent blade in a fist and easily shattering it.

The fingers of his other hand wrapped around Neph's neck.

For a moment, everything seemed to stand still...

Sunny was emerging from the shadows, but he was slow, too slow. Too slow to change anything.

…Then, Neph's neck snapped like a twig. Her body grew limp.

'...'

His mind was empty.

For a split second, everyone froze, petrified.

In that moment of shock, Neph's hand rose and grabbed the creature's wrist.

The sparks dancing in her eyes suddenly ignited, turning into two blinding stars.

White radiance shining through the gaps of her broken armor became larger, hotter, and infinitely brighter.

She was like a mass of blinding silver light, not too different from the merciless white sun that burned in the scorched sky.

A moment later, her radiance exploded into a flurry of flames, which swallowed both her slender silhouette and the abominable corpse of Master Xu.

Suddenly, the unbearable heat of the desert seemed mild and cold.

Chapter-1220: Indestructible

A towering bonfire of pristine flames enveloped both Nephis and the vessel of the Gate Guardian, rising high into the sky. It bloomed like a beautiful white flower, suffused with both brilliant radiance and incinerating heat.

The soul flame burned so hot that, for a moment, Sunny actually felt dreadfully cold, as if he had been transported back to the frigid fields of the Antarctic Center.

With a curse, he staggered back, fell, and rolled away.

'Hell!'

Neph's flames could be warm and nurturing, healing and purifying anything they touched. But they could be ruthless and ferocious, destroying everything in their path.

Sunny knew that he would not survive a plunge into the blossoming bonfire — he might have shared a bond with Nephis, but he did not share the lineage of Sun God with her. Even then, Changing Star was not immune to the destructive fury of the fire — she was only capable of being locked in the cyclic agony of having her flesh burned, restored, and then burned again without dying.

He thought that he heard a distorted shriek escape from the flames, but it was swallowed by the dull roar of the immolating blaze. Nephis and the abomination were in the center of the dire conflagration, their figures obscured by its radiance — he did not know what exactly was happening there, just that only one of them would emerge from the flames alive.

The sand around the white bonfire was already melting, soon to turn into black, brittle glass.

'Curse it…'

Sunny could not allow himself to be concerned about Nephis right now.

Because while she had dealt with Master Xu — at least temporarily— there was still another vessel of the great abomination coming after them.

Jumping to his feet, he spun around.

Seishan had both her arms wrenched and cruelly broken, while the extent of Morgan's wounds was unknown. Effie had received a blow from the Gate Guardian, as well, but her shield had protected her from harm — at the cost of being destroyed.

So, only Sunny, Effie, and Kai were left standing.

And Saint.

He sensed the movement of shadows.

[Here it comes!]

A dark blur flashed across the desert, lunging at them from behind.

As it did, Effie's spear collided with it in mid-air.

The huntress had tossed it with terrible speed and precision, catching the vessel of the Gate Guardian in the chest. The whole upper torso of the taken corpse exploded, instantly pulverized into a ghastly stream of viscous crimson liquid.

Propelled by inertia, the mutilated corpse flew several dozens meters forward, the crimson stream stretching behind it as if suspended in the air.

Then, however, the liquid was pulled back and reformed into a human silhouette, still a split second away from turning back into flesh.

Before it could, a flaming arrow hit the half-formed corpse and

exploded, obliterating its entire left side.

The Gate Guardian was not disturbed.

The mangled corpse calmly walked forward, its flesh already growing back. Its shattered ribs were assembled from bloodied fragments, and its bared heart grew whole before starting to beat once again. One mocking eye had already appeared from the liquid mess of its destroyed face.

Sunny felt a chill run down his spine.

'What… what the hell…'

The sight in front of him was so terrifying that it almost appeared ridiculous.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny dashed forward.

He was not in good shape… in fact, his state was terrible. Not only was he utterly exhausted, sapped of all energy by the merciless heat, and low on essence, but he was even devoid of the support of his shadows.

It had been a long time since Sunny had to enter a serious fight without being augmented by at least one of them. Without their familiar enhancement, he felt slow, fragile, and weak.

'Doesn't matter. It's do or die…'

The Sin of Solace laughed, amused by his defiant resolve to give it his all.

"No, no... it's just die..."

Sunny and Saint arrived near the vessel of the Gate Guardian at the same time. Acting as one, they attacked the creature from different sides. A sword made of darkness and a sword made of immaculate white jade struck in unison, aiming to prevent the corpse from taking another step.

Somewhere behind them, Morgan rose from the sand with a groan.

Her sword was destroyed, but she didn't seem to care — her vermilion eyes blazed with murderous fury, and the Princess of War shot forward like a piercing arrow.

Seishan's eyes rolled back, revealing a different pair of pupils — these ones inhuman and monstrous, surrounded by a sea of red. Her graceful figure suddenly grew much taller — taller than Effie, even when hunched. Her limbs elongated, and long claws extended from her fingers. Her smooth grey skin suddenly turned rough like that of a shark.

Finally, the monster's jaw unhinged, revealing several rows of terrifying triangular teeth.

Kai was pale and somber, drawing the string of his bow.

'...Not good.'

Sunny tore the Sin of Solace out of the body of the great abomination and desperately dodged. Perhaps because the corpse did not fully recover from the previous barrage of attacks, its movements were much slower — barely faster than those of Dire Fang had been.

Still, there was no hope for him to escape the retaliation.

Instead of trying to simply evade the strike, he simultaneously delivered a backward cut with his sword, slicing through the elbow joint of the corpse.

That allowed Sunny to avoid the crushing blow by a hair's breadth.

Saint received a bloody fist on her shield and was thrown back, crashing into the slope of a dune.

At that moment, Jet was already there.

Instead of relying on enchanted weapons, she struck the abomination with her fist. It passed through the chest of the vessel unopposed, directly attacking its soul.

Morgan was there, as well. Her palm fell like an executioner's axe, severing the creature's spine.

And finally, the monstrous figure of Seishan appeared by the Gate Guardian's side. Her arms were still broken, hanging limply. Instead of relying on her claws, she sank her frightening teeth into the taken corpse, ripping away a huge chunk of its neck, shoulder, and upper chest.

'There has to be a limit to how much punishment that thing can take… there has to be…'

A desperate hope burned in Sunny's chest.

…But if there really was a limit, it seemed that the creature had not reached it yet.

Chapter-1221: Unstoppable

'I… am going to die…'

The thought that flashed through Sunny's mind had nothing to do with the fact that each strike of the possessed corpse was devastating enough to obliterate his body, but more so with the strain that fighting the abominations was putting on it.

Yes, it was true — Sunny was facing a Great Nightmare Creature, but he felt as if exhaustion was going to kill him even if the creature did not.

Time moves slowly in a battle like the one they were fighting. He wasn't sure how many seconds had passed since the second vessel of the Gate Guardian had shown up — a dozen? Two dozen?

Maybe it was just five or six instead.

The six Masters and one Shadow were somehow holding up against the harrowing abomination, for now. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that the constant barrage of attacks did restrain the corpse a little — if there was one vulnerability they could exploit, after all, it was that the vessels of the Guardian were not as resilient as the body of a true Great creature would have been.

Perhaps it was because each of them was at the pinnacle of what a human Ascended could be, and knew that there would be no retreat. They fought without holding anything back, knowing that death was looming, almost inevitable.

Sunny was relatively unharmed, for now, and so was Saint. Kai had been circling above the abomination, sending one enchanted arrow flying after another.

The rest of them… were in dire straits.

Jet was, perhaps, mangled the most, but her unique constitution allowed her to persist in her attempts to shatter the creature's soul despite that. By now, Soul Reaper looked no less of a corpse than their opponent, and maybe even more so.

Both Morgan and her were fighting with their bare fists — although, in the case of Morgan, her entire body was the weapon, not just her hands. She had also suffered much more damage than any of them, often taking the initiative to shield the others with her body. That was because the Princess of War was physically the sturdiest, except maybe Effie.

The difference between the two was that Morgan seemed to have absorbed a powerful healing enchantment into her Aspect Ability, which allowed her to recover from the wounds that would have permanently taken the huntress out of the fight.

Seishan had gone even further than Jet and Morgan — with her arms broken, she had to resort to using her monstrous teeth to damage the abomination. Her jaws did not seem any less lethal than a powerful Memory would have been, but the need to be in close, almost intimate proximity to the enemy put her in grave danger.

The hideous, ferocious creature she had transformed into was covered in blood, both her own and that of the Guardian.

Effie was in a much better position due to the long reach of her Transcendent spear.

Together, they fought the great abomination, desperately trying to destroy it, slow it down… or at least prevent it from approaching the beautiful bonfire of white flames that still burned behind them.

'Die, die… why won't you die!'

The Sin of Solace tore through the rippling air, but the vessel of the Gate Guardian was moving too fast. The jade blade barely scratched its skin, but this time, Sunny was not fast enough to retreat — a sharp pain pierced his right side, and he fell back with a scream.

For the first time since he had acquired the Shroud of Dusk, the black

silk was thoroughly torn apart. Sunny's flesh beneath it was shredded and turned into an appalling mess — the wound was large enough for most Ascended to be at the risk of bleeding out, but he was different.

Still, it would have been a fatal one if not for Bone Weave. The abomination's glancing strike cracked his ribs, but did not manage to shatter them — otherwise, Sunny would have lost his entire lung.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it…'

Shaking like a drunk, he rose to his feet. Sweat was rolling down his skin, adding to the pain and suffering.

Things… were not going well for them.

Morgan seemed on the verge of running out of essence — before, all her wounds would swiftly heal, but now, she was forced to concentrate on only a few of the most dire ones, leaving the rest open.

Jet was starting to slow down, because this fight was a true nightmare for her. Facing one overwhelming opponent was the least favorable situation for her Aspect, since it prevented her from absorbing the essence of slain enemies to replenish her own.

Just at that moment, Seishan suffered a terrible blow, falling into the sand like a broken doll.

Sunny and Saint were still recovering from their last attacks, so Effie was momentarily left alone against the harrowing creature. The corpse moved with tremendous speed, grabbing the shaft of her spear and pulling the huntress off her feet. A split second before its other hand delivered a lethal blow, Kai suddenly fell from the sky, ramming into the taken corpse and throwing it back.

The corpse brought its elbow down on Kai's spine, and he fell into the sand with a pained scream.

'Curse it all!'

Sunny lunged forward, and at the same time, Saint did too.

His mangled side was pulsing with terrible pain.

He was tired.

But he had to do something.

Because there was still hope…

Even though the vessel of the Gate Guardian seemed indestructible and unstoppable, it was weakening. It was not very noticeable, yet — but it was true. The corpse had become a tiny bit slower, its strikes were a tiny bit less forceful. The speed at which its flesh mended itself had diminished a little, as well.

The creature had a limit, indeed.

They just had to push it over that limit.

Sunny had not summoned Nightmare or Imp, knowing that they were too weak for this battle. He wasn't sure that he could summon them — his shadows, which served as the gates of his soul, were with Nephis, inside the incinerating mass of white flames. Even if he could, all the two would be able to do was buy him a second or two with their deaths.

So, he had to buy those seconds himself.

He attacked, putting everything he had — all his strength, all his cunning, all his will — into the attack. At the same time, Saint thrust her sword forward, covering her cracked breastplate with the broken remains of her shield.

But it was not enough.

The great abomination easily avoided Saint's sword, and stepped forward. Its fist struck Sunny like a mountain, and the next thing he knew...

He was staring at the vibrant azure sky.

'Ah… I was… too slow…'

Sunny tried to stand up and gasped, overcome with unbearable pain. His arm seemed to be broken… no, it was only dislocated… and bloody foam was forming on his lips.

Looking up, he saw Morgan stepping in front of Jet, who was on her knees, shielding her from a lethal blow — both of them were sent flying back and landed on the sand in a heap of bloodied flesh.

Effie grunted as she received a downward strike on her crossed hands. Her steel body trembled, and a whirlwind of sand rose into the air around her, thrown up by the shockwave of the terrible impact. In the next moment, she staggered back and fell.

The Gate Guardian… was left standing alone, unopposed.

It lingered for a split second, then took a step toward Seishan and raised a fist to finish her off.

The corpse's face was terribly mangled, and its teeth were in full view, as if the creature was grinning.

Sunny groaned and sat up.

'I won't get there in time…'

The abomination struck.

Before it could kill Seishan, however…

A bloody fist suddenly emerged from its chest.

The creature froze, then slowly turned its head.

A slender hand flashed, separating the head from the neck.

Standing behind the Gate Guardian was a bewitching woman in a torn carmine dress, her long black hair covered in sand. She was almost inhumanly beautiful… however, her breathtaking face was covered in blood, an ugly torn wound stretching from her forehead to the tip of her chin. It was as if someone had vandalized an immortal masterpiece by slicing through it with a sharp knife.

One of Beastmaster's eyes was glued shut by dried blood, but the other burned with cold, murderous wrath.

Her scarlet lips parted, revealing pearly white teeth.

"I don't think you'll submit. So… just die…"

Chapter-1222: Against All Hope

Beastmaster's fist was still protruding from the abomination's chest, but in the next moment, she tore it out, almost ripping the entire corpse apart.

She seemed angry… really angry.

"How dare you raise a hand to my sister…"

Before the abomination could assemble itself back together, the beautiful Saint kicked it, sending the mangled corpse flying back. It landed on the sand a dozen meters away, twitched slightly, and then rose, already knitting itself into a single whole again.

The two of them stood opposite each other, looking intently at the enemy. The creature was bloodied and beaten, but eerily calm. There was a smile on its lips.

Beastmaster looked just as battered, her face torn and painted with blood. Her expression was dark and full of cold fury.

She gritted her teeth and spat:

"I won't show you mercy."

The corpse stared at her with a smile.

Then, it suddenly spoke.

Tilting its head, the corpse asked:

"...What is mercy?"

The Saint's expression slightly changed.

'What the hell… why are they talking…'

Sunny tried to stand up and only succeeded by using the Sin of Solace as a crutch. He was struggling to breathe, but it was alright… as the great connoisseur of physical trauma that he was, Sunny judged his condition as not really life-threatening.

For now.

He couldn't really understand why Beastmaster was wasting her time issuing threats to a great abomination instead of attacking it, but that had given him time to assess the situation, at least.

The remaining members of the survivor group… were alive. No one had died yet, from what he could see. That said, all of them were severely injured. Only Morgan and Saint looked like they could still fight… and Effie, too, although there was a pained expression on her face. With how exhausted and beaten they were, though, he doubted that they would be of any use.

Sunny himself would not be able to do much.

Neph's condition… was unknown.

'Can Beastmaster finish off the creature alone?'

In the next moment, however, that question was rendered meaningless. Sunny had also received an answer to why the beautiful demoness was wasting time conversing with the creature.

She had not been wasting time. She had been stalling for time.

As the sunlight pouring from the incandescent sky grew a little brighter, a figure made of pure radiance attacked the vessel of the Great Guardian from behind. At the same moment, Beastmaster dashed forward.

'Summer Knight!'

There was not one Saint, but two. The two Transcendents of Clan Song and Clan Valor seemed to have made a temporary alliance.

A hoarse sigh escaped from Sunny's lips. He summoned the runes and glanced at them to make sure that Nephis was still alive. After doing

that, he took a step back and fell onto the scorching sand.

Closing his eyes, Sunny allowed the pain to wash over him. He only kept up with the ensuing fight through shadow sense, tense and wary.

The vessel of the Gate Guardian… was a harrowing foe, even for the Saints. However, despite all its power and uncanny tenacity, it didn't seem to be a match for them.

Perhaps the situation would have been different if it were any other two Transcendents, but Beastmaster and Sir Gilead were both outstanding. Especially Beastmaster — he noticed that wounds delivered by her took a lot longer to close. Some even remained open, as if something was preventing them from healing.

There was something else, too...

Sunny felt a fourth shadow standing at a distance. It was slender, delicate... and familiar.

'Cassie?'

So it was Cassie who had led the Saints to their aid.

Sunny felt some tension drain from his mangled body.

...As time went on, the corpse seemed to become a little muddled. Its attacks lost some of their edge, and there were drops of blood falling from its nose. Bestmaster was not only fighting it, but also battering the creature with powerful mental attacks.

'I think… they can actually manage it…'

Before they did, however, the bonfire of incinerating white flame suddenly grew weak, and then disappeared. Two shadows were revealed amidst molten sand and obsidian glass — one crumpled and motionless, the other standing above it. Then, the source of the second shadow swayed and fell.

The remaining vessel was taking longer and longer to heal its wounds. The Saints attacked it without pause, methodical in their

relentless assault. Sunny could not see them, but felt the shape and position of the shadows change at a frantic pace.

Slowly… torturously… that pace slowed down.

And then, at some point, one of the shadows grew shallow and empty.

The vessel of the Gate Guardian had been reduced to a pile of unrecognizable flesh.

The battle had not been easy for Beastmaster and Summer Knight, but both of them were left standing.

Sunny gritted his teeth, then opened his eyes and slowly sat up.

…As soon as the creature died, Beastmaster turned around and walked over to Seishan. Kneeling in front of the hideous monster, the beautiful demoness gently placed her hand on her shoulder and smiled.

"I'm here, Seishan. I was on time."

In front of her, the monstrous creature slowly grew smaller, turning back into an exquisitely beautiful young woman with silken grey skin. Her body was beaten and broken, but she was alive, and even conscious, albeit barely.

Beastmaster whispered a few more words to her sister, then rose to her feet.

Her gaze slowly shifted to Morgan, who was kneeling on the sand a few dozen meters away. The smile disappeared from her lips. The look in the beautiful Saint's one open eye…

Did not promise anything good.

Sunny shivered, suddenly remembering how all of them had ended up in this cursed desert, to begin with.

Three Category Four Gates might have opened in Antarctica, but the great clans…

Were still at war.

Sunny was not going to get between Beastmaster and Morgan, not that he could have done anything if he did.

But Nephis was also here, laying unconscious within a ring of black glass.

And she was a daughter of the King of Swords, too, even if only technically.

'Damn it all…'

There was no need to do anything, though, because as Beastmaster was looking coldly at Morgan, a tall figure in battered armor suddenly appeared in front of the Princess of War, blocking her from the beautiful Saint's suffocating gaze.

Summer Knight stared at Beastmaster and shook his head silently.

"Don't even think about it."

A dangerous smile appeared on her lips. The beautiful demoness raised an exquisite eyebrow and spoke with a hint of challenge:

"...What if I do?"

Sir Gilead's face remained calm.

"I'll kill you."

Beastmaster kept her gaze on him for a few seconds, then turned away and laughed.

"...Maybe next time, then."

Glancing at the setting sun, she raised her voice and called out:

"Come on! Everyone who is still alive, stand up. We need to find shelter before night comes."

Chapter-1223: Diverging Goals

The sun was drowning in the white sands of the desert, and the murderous heat that had been tormenting them before was slowly dissipating, soon to be replaced by a terrible cold.

And the chilling terror of the coming night.

The battered group of humans was making its way to a towering ruin. The two Saints were holding up well, but the Ascended were in a dire state — all of them bore vicious wounds, and each step was torture.

The only healer among them was unconscious, and the Memories with restorative enchantments that some of them possessed were not powerful enough to deal with the multitude of severe injuries, at least not immediately.

Jet looked slightly better than she had during the battle with the vessels of the Guardian — she managed to kill a Nightmare Creature that ambushed them as they traversed the desert, and absorbed some soul essence. Still, just glancing at her mangled body was a bit chilling.

Seishan's arms were wrapped in fabric, and even though her wounds had been treated, she could only walk by leaning on Beastmaster. Kai was hovering above the sand with a pale face — the great abomination's blow had damaged his spine, and although he wasn't paralyzed, the archer was in a sea of pain.

Effie was visibly limping, while Morgan seemed utterly spent and weak.

As for Sunny… people sometimes said that he looked like a doll, but if that was true, currently he looked like a rag doll that had been neglected for decades and then thoroughly chewed by an animal or

two.

'Ah… it hurts.'

He was hurting, but the pain was tolerable. At least the five shadows were once again augmenting him — with their help, he could manage the strenuous journey without too much trouble.

Saint was carrying Nephis, who was still unconscious, in her arms. Neph's damaged armor and clothes had been destroyed by the incinerating flames, so she was wrapped in Cassie's seawave cloak.

The blind girl herself was walking behind the taciturn knight, side by side with Sunny. She was the only one in the group who looked exhausted and drained by the heat, but not battered.

Then again, Cassie had been in the middle of the battle between the great clans, too. Many Awakened, enthralled abominations, and Masters of Clan Song had attempted to kill her, only to die by her hand. Her armor was riddled with dents and covered in dried blood, so there was nothing fresh or glamorous about how she looked.

Sunny glanced at her, then said quietly:

"By the way… you were just in time. Thank you."

Cassie remained silent for a while, then shook her head.

"There is no need to thank me. It was just a fortunate coincidence."

He smiled.

'Yeah, no. Zero chance of that.'

Sunny studied her delicate face, then asked:

"You knew, didn't you?"

Cassie raised an eyebrow.

"Knew what?"

His expression darkened.

"About the Gates. That was why you told me to write a message to Rain… you knew that we were going to get stuck in this damned desert for a long, long time. You knew that Antarctica was going to be destroyed, too"

The blind girl turned her head, and he saw her beautiful blue eyes. Her expression was calm.

"I know nothing."

Sunny scoffed.

"Right… sure. So, you don't know what is going to happen next, either?"

Cassie turned away and shrugged.

"Oh, no. That, I do know."

She lingered for a few moments, then nodded in the direction of Beastmaster and Sir Gilead.

"They are going to abandon us."

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then chuckled and looked away.

"You don't say."

One didn't need to be an oracle to know that the two Saints that Cassie had brought were going to leave the members of the cohort behind. They had already helped Sunny and the rest by allowing them to survive…

But both Beastmaster and Summer Knight had their own priorities.

For Beastmaster, it was Seishan. For Sir Gilead, it was Morgan… and, perhaps, Nephis. That was the reason they had not left the desert immediately after escaping the battlefield.

Both Saints could return to the waking world at any moment — they just needed a safe place and some time to activate their tethers. Once they did that, however, they were not going to be able to return to

this particular corner of the Nightmare Desert without approaching the three gargantuan Gates first.

The problem was that they could not bring too many people with them. Sunny knew that Beastmaster's limit was two — she had delivered both Seishan and Ascended Bast to East Antarctica, after all.

But most Saints could only transport people between worlds one at a time.

In any case, most of them were going to be left behind.

'What to do, what to do…'

Sunny desperately needed to think of a solution, but he was too tired to form complicated thoughts.

After remaining silent for a while, he asked:

"What about Saint Tyris? Do you know where she is?"

Cassie slowly shook her head.

"We saw no sign of her after entering the Dream Realm. Same for Silent Stalker. The desert is vast… chances are, they were sent someplace far away from us. Sky Tide would have been able to escape from the Gate Guardian, but she was already spent at the end of the battle. She might have had to flee into the waking world."

Sunny felt slightly disappointed that there was little hope of receiving help from Saint Tyris. But, at the same time, he was happy to know that she might have already retreated from the Nightmare Desert.

That, at least, meant that she was still alive. Her entire clan was there in Antarctica, too — considering that great abominations were now wandering the Southern Quadrant, Sky Tide was the only one who could ensure their safety. She bore a heavy responsibility, considering that it was her actions that had exiled the White Feather clan to the frigid continent.

And she had done those things to save Sunny and Cassie.

He sighed.

'I hope Saint Tyris and Master Roan make it out of Antarctica alive.'

And Kim... and millions of civilians that had not been evacuated yet, as well as the soldiers of the Evacuation Army.

Sunny and the rest, however, could not do anything to help them, not anymore.

Now, their goal was to escape the Nightmare Desert.

...He didn't know which task was more dangerous.

Chapter-1224: Second Night

They managed to reach the ruin before the ancient dead rose from beneath the sand. The structure they used as shelter was palatial and vast, isolated from the desert by a wide field of black glass. It didn't seem like a building that people were supposed to live in, though.

After observing many ruins across the desert, Sunny was starting to feel as though there was a reason why all of them were so strange, broken, and deformed. It was almost as if these structures had not been built here… but had instead fallen from the sky and shattered after hitting the white sands.

Then again, the Nightmare Desert might not have been a desert in ancient times. Rolling dunes like these were usually left behind by dying seas. If the vast expanse of white sand had once been the bottom of an ocean… then maybe the structures had not fallen, but instead drowned.

Why would Ariel build his pyramid at the bottom of a sea?

Sunny shook his head.

'No… the description of the Mirror of Truth did not mention any seas or oceans.'

There was a lot of talk about rivers in the description of other Memories he had received during the Chain of Nightmares. But what river could have been so vast?

The spacious hall the survivors had sought shelter in was illuminated by the light of a small fire. Beastmaster was roasting monster meat above it… she seemed relaxed and amiable, but everyone else was terribly tense.

That was because the bewitching Saint was perhaps no less

dangerous than the apocalyptic battle going on outside.

Now that they had escaped the Gate Guardian, at least for a few hours, everyone became painfully aware that being in her presence was an insidiously terrifying experience. Beastmaster could subtly take hold of anyone's mind, after all, to enthrall or drive them mad.

Perhaps she already had.

Sunny was uneasy, but Summer Knight was more tense than the others — if there was one reason for the beautiful demoness to warp the minds of the survivors, it was to kill him and get rid of the daughters of Valor.

As if reading his thoughts, Beastmaster smiled.

"Gods. Can you stop drilling a hole in my forehead, Gilead? I know I am pretty… but still, a knight like you should have some manners. Stop staring."

Summer Knight continued looking in her direction, unperturbed.

"...Were pretty. Have you looked in the mirror recently?"

Beastmaster looked up at him, blinked a couple of times, then traced the bleeding wound running across her face with a delicate finger.

"Oh, that thing? Ah, it refuses to heal. Whispering Blade left me with that present… before he died. Miserably. It's too bad that you couldn't protect your liege, isn't it, Gilead?"

Summer Knight's expression darkened. Morgan, who was sitting beside him, looked at the beautiful Saint coldly.

Her vermilion eyes were burning with fury.

"You vile witch…"

Beastmaster laughed.

"Come on! Don't be so serious. Look, the food is ready. Let's eat."

She smiled brightly, and although her face was disfigured by the ugly torn wound, that smile made something stir in Sunny's heart.

'That woman… is lethally dangerous. And completely crazy. I really… really don't want to have anything to do with her.'

His mind was telling him one thing, but his emotions refused to listen. He had to remind himself of the Corrupted Tyrant the beautiful demoness had arranged to be unleashed in the middle of a siege capital, and only came to his senses then.

Contempt. That was all Sunny was supposed to feel toward Beastmaster.

…Still, he wasn't going to refuse food.

Coming closer, Sunny took his portion of the meat, then sat down and hungrily bit into it.

The tantalizing Saint gave him a curious look.

"Little brother… how are you still alive?"

Sunny frowned, then looked at himself. The black silk of the Shroud of Dusk was ripped open, and his entire side resembled minced meat. He had set the arm that had been dislocated, but his face was still covered in dried blood. At least the internal damage he had received seemed to have healed to some extent — he could breathe, and there was no bloody foam on his lips anymore.

Sunny shrugged.

"I don't bleed easily."

Beastmaster's smile widened a little.

"How interesting."

With that, she handed the others some food and moved over to feed Seishan, who still couldn't move her hands. The sight of the two of them being so… tender and sisterly with each other felt weird, for some reason.

Everyone was too exhausted to have an appetite, but they still forced themselves to eat. Right now, food was fuel, and all of them were running low on it.

As they consumed the fragrant meat, Nephis suddenly moved and opened her eyes. There was an empty void in them, but slowly, arduously, a spark of humanity returned, and she turned her head, looking at the silhouettes of the humans sitting in front of the fire.

Sunny glanced in her direction, then turned his attention back to the food and sent a mental message:

[It's night. We're in a large ruin. The vessels of the Gate Guardian are gone — you killed one, Beastmaster and Summer Knight killed the other. Cassie led them to us just in time.]

He thought for a moment, and added:

[Oh. Also, you should probably summon an armor Memory.]

Nephis stared at him for a bit, then moved slightly beneath the seawave cloak and closed her eyes. A few seconds later, a flurry of sparks surrounded her body, and she rose. Her slender figure was wrapped in a fitting black material, which Sunny recognized as the inner layer of the Starlight Legion Armor with a bit of surprise.

Nephis swayed a little, then slowly walked over to the fire and sat down. He handed her the Endless Spring, while Cassie offered her a portion of roasted meat.

Neph drank deeply from the beautiful glass bottle, then took the meat and looked silently at Morgan and Sir Gilead.

Summer Knight offered her a tired smile.

"Lady Changing Star, you are awake. Thank the gods."

There was a strange strain in his voice.

Morgan looked between the two, then shook her head.

"Well, now… the two of you are making me feel bad."

Nephis silently sank her teeth into the juicy meat, her expression neutral.

…Sunny's, however, was not.

'So that's how it is.'

He had learned everything he needed to know from that short exchange.

'Sir Gilead can only take one person back with him.'

Chapter-1225: Short Respite

After the food was finished, a tense silence settled inside the ancient ruin. Everyone was tired beyond words, but no one dared to fall asleep… not only out of fear of the Gate Guardian finding them, but also because of the two Saints.

Beastmaster and Summer Knight sat on opposite sides of the fire, staring at each other tensely. Neither could lower their guard, knowing that the opponent would, perhaps, use that moment to launch an attack.

'I guess their alliance was doomed to be a short-lived one.'

Sunny tiredly closed his eyes, then yawned.

"No offense... but why don't you just leave? Then those of us who have to stay will get some rest, at least."

Both Saints looked at him with a hint of surprise. After a few short moments, Sir Gilead shook his head slightly.

"I must admit, I admire your composure, Master Sunless."

Summer Knight must have been under the impression that the people he couldn't save would be terrified, perhaps even begging him to take them back to the waking world instead of Morgan.

Well, Sunny did not consider begging to be beneath him — if there was a point to it. But he knew that the Saint of Clan Valor was never going to abandon the daughter of his Sovereign.

Sunny shrugged.

"I'm too tired to be worried."

Beastmaster chuckled, then said in a raspy voice:

"The reason why we haven't left is very simple. You are not a Saint, so you wouldn't know… but there are conditions that have to be met in order to return to the waking world. Namely, our anchors in the waking world are affected by the Call the same way your anchors in the Dream Realm are affected by it.

Every Seed exerts a pulling force, and since there are so many of them in the Nightmare Desert, that force is quite ubiquitous. We need to find a spot where it is relatively weak first, and this ruin is not one of these spots."

She paused for a moment, and then added:

"They are not too hard to find, though. I am willing to bet that we'll encounter at least one tomorrow."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

'So that's how it is…'

It was only logical that Saints were influenced by the Call even in the Dream Realm. In fact, the influence they had to endure would be much greater than what the rest of them suffered through — Sunny knew it because of his own experiences as an Awakened and as a Master. After the Ascension, he felt the pull of the Call much clearer.

'It's interesting that she said anchor instead of tether, though.'

The point was… neither Beastmaster nor Summer Knight could leave the ruin — and the Nightmare Desert — before the night ended.

Sunny nodded.

"Okay. You stand guard, then."

With that, he carefully lowered himself to the ground, making sure to lay on the uninjured side, and closed his eyes.

Beastmaster was visibly amused by his nonchalant attitude, but Sunny didn't care. He just wanted to sleep.

Falling asleep was risky, but so was staying awake and refusing his

body and mind the much-needed rest.

There was a bit of silence in the dark ruin. Then, the others slowly followed his example.

Soon, only Summer Knight and the beautiful demoness were left awake.

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Sunny was a bit surprised to come back to his senses alive. Of course, his shadows would have warned him if anything truly dangerous happened while he slept — still, being in the company of Saints and great abominations was a bit above their pay grade.

Well... technically, the shadows weren't paid anything, so everything was above their pay grade.

In any case, Sunny did not feel particularly rested — his body was still in a terrible state and covered in wounds. However, his condition was much better than it had been before. Due to the blessings of the Graceless Dusk and the tenacity of his unique physique, he felt… somewhat restored.

Sitting up, he saw rays of pale sunlight pouring through the cracks in the roof of the ruin. The air still felt chilly, so it must have been early in the morning.

The chill was going to be replaced with appalling heat soon enough.

Shaking his head, Sunny stood up with a grimace and stretched his neck.

He was the first to wake up, and everyone else was still asleep — except for Summer Knight and Beastmaster, who were still where they had been before.

'Have these two been staring at each other the entire night?'

Summoning the Endless Spring, he nodded at them and forced out a smile.

"Good morning."

Sir Gilead greeted him calmly, while the beautiful demoness smiled.

"You look less like a corpse, little brother."

Sunny stared her for a few moments, then said stiffly:

"Thanks for the compliment, I guess."

'Why the hell is she calling me "little brother", all of a sudden? First of all, I'm not her brother… second of all, I'm not little!'

The torn wound on Beastmaster's face was still shedding drops of blood, but that did not stop her from laughing.

He struggled to not be enchanted by that laugh.

The beautiful Saint lingered for a bit, then asked in a languid tone:

"By the way, I was meaning to ask…"

Her eyes glimmered with friendly amusement.

"...How did you and Changing Star kill Dire Fang?"

Sunny looked at her and remained silent for a while. Beastmaster's tone sounded relaxed, but he could not help but wonder if there was a hidden threat beneath that calmness.

Being threatened by the tantalizing enchantress… would be a frightening experience.

When the pain of his Flaw grew unbearable, Sunny shrugged.

"The same way you and Sir Gilead killed a great abomination. By combining our strength and exploiting his weaknesses."

Beastmaster studied him for a few moments, then turned away with a scoff.

"Kids these days are truly terrifying…"

Sunny frowned.

"Why? Should I expect to become the target of Clan Song's vendetta after I return to the waking world? Because, let me tell you… I just barely managed to stop being targeted by Clan Valor before coming to Antarctica and experiencing the wonders of the Chain of Nightmares. It has been a very, very rough year for me, so… I would really appreciate some leniency…"

The beautiful demoness chuckled.

"You seem really confident that you'll be able to return, though? How optimistic!"

Sunny blinked a couple of times and stared at her with a bleak expression.

After a bit of bitter silence, he sighed.

"Well. If you put it like that… I take it back. It's not a good morning at all…"

Chapter-1226: Alluring Offer

Soon, the group left the ruin and ventured into the desert once again.

Their speed was much greater than the day before — not only because the weaker member of the group had received an opportunity to rest, but also because their wounds were healed by Nephis.

Nephis… did not look well. Physically, she was perfectly healthy, and anyone who did not know her as deeply as Sunny did would have assumed that everything was fine. But he could feel how drained and hurt she really was. Neph had not recovered from using her Aspect to destroy the vessels of the Gate Guardian yet…

He was worried that, perhaps, she never would.

Nevertheless, Nephis had insisted on treating everyone's injuries. Even Seishan's — only Beastmaster, whose wound had been delivered by Whispering Blade's sword, had turned out to be beyond her ability to mend flesh. The ugly cut on the diabolically beautiful face of the enchantress still continued to weep blood.

There was some logic to providing aid to the enemies of Clan Valor. As long as they were in the desert, they were on the same side — no one knew when the Gate Guardian would attack again, or what kind of monstrous abominations awaited them in the scorching expanse of the Nightmare Desert. So, the higher the strength of the group was, the higher Neph's chances to survive would be.

That was also the reason why Sunny did not stop her from treating his wounds. Usually, he was deeply reluctant to let Nephis torture herself on his behalf… but now, both of them were in dire danger. He had to be in the best state possible to ensure that they made it out of the Dream Realm alive.

The group walked across the white sands of the cursed desert like lost souls wandering the vast expanse of a scorching hell.

The Nightmare Desert was full of dangers that even two Saints would find difficult, or outright impossible, to survive. More than that, their chances of finding a spot where the pull of the Seeds was weak enough to escape were slim, at least in a short amount of time.

…Or it would have been, if not for the unique advantage the group possessed.

That advantage, of course, was Cassie. The blind oracle had long proved how irreplaceable she was in the Dream Realm. Now that she was a Master, her supernatural intuition had only grown stronger.

Guided by Cassie, they managed to avoid the most dreadful dangers and go deeper and deeper into the desert without losing a single member of the group to its horrors. Of course, the cursed sea of dunes was too dire of a land to make their journey easy.

There were still hazards, pitfalls, and abominable creatures of all kinds that they had to avoid, overcome, and fight. But with Summer Knight and Beastmaster protecting the Ascended, none of it managed to harvest their lives.

And, by the time the sun started to roll toward the horizon, they finally stumbled on what they had been hoping to find… some of them had been, at least.

The ruin in front of them was not very large, and looked like a spent candle. It was low and misshapen, as if furious flames had once melted the black stones into a searing liquid, which then cooled down and solidified in a chaotic pattern.

A vast expanse of sand around the ruin had been turned into a sea of uneven black glass.

That was not important, though. What was important was that the misshapen structure was distant enough from the surrounding Seeds to allow the Saints to leave the Dream Realm from inside it.

The group made its way into the ruin, stepping across obsidian glass.

Inside, the floor was just the same — everything told the story of furious flames that had raged within the structure once, turning it into a scorched husk.

Stepping on the cracked black glass, Beastmaster breathed in deeply, and then looked at the rest of them.

"Well. There's no point in dragging this out… Seishan and I will be leaving. It was nice knowing you all! Granted, I can take one more person with me — those of you who have fought against the great clan Song, I hope you won't be offended if I don't extend the invitation. Oh, except for you, little brother. You, Raised by Wolves, and Nightingale.

I can help one of you escape this bothersome predicament."

She smiled brightly, giving them a measured look.

The underlying message of her offer was clear — you would owe me.

Or maybe even… I would own you.

A tense silence settled in the chamber of black glass.

Eventually, it was Effie who broke it:

"I'm sorry. My mom told me not to follow strange women."

The words were just like what one would expect from the rambunctious huntress, but her tone was uncharacteristically somber. Effie seemed to be struggling with the decision, and yet, there was no room for compromise left after what she had said.

Kai and Sunny silently shook their heads, expressing their solidarity.

Beastmaster laughed.

"Suit yourselves. Seishan, come closer."

She took her hand, and soon, without much fanfare, they disappeared without a trace.

The two beautiful monsters were gone.

'Just like that…'

Sunny looked at the spot where they had been standing a few seconds ago with a complicated expression.

That had been his chance to save himself… and he let it slip from his fingers.

He felt some regret, but at the same time, Sunny knew that he could not have made a different decision. There was no way in hell that he would leave Kai, Effie, Jet, Cassie, and Nephis to die to save himself.

He had been forced to do something similar twice, and those were some of the most vile moments of his life.

…This time, at least, no one insisted that he did.

At that moment, a heavy sigh escaped from Summer Knight's lips.

He threw a long look at Nephis, then walked over to her and gently took her hand.

"Lady Changing Star… please accept these Memories. There is not much I can do to help you today, but these are some of the best weapons and tools I've been able to earn, receive, and collect. You must survive. I know you can, because you have already done it once."

A pale smile appeared on Neph's face.

It was so bitterly ironic, for her to be thrown back into the Nightmare Desert after suffering so much to escape it.

She retracted her hand and looked away.

Even though Sir Gilead seemed to have expected an answer, Nephis remained silent.

He lowered his hand, then took a step away and looked at Morgan.

"Lady Morgan… if you will. I am ready to take us back to the siege capital."

Morgan smiled.

'Here they go. Now, we will have to...'

…And shook her head.

Sunny blinked.

"No, not yet."

Noticing confusion in Sir Gilead's eyes, Morgan shrugged.

"You can take me away later, but for now… for now, we still have a chance to reach the pyramid. We can still complete our mission. Yes, our situation is far from perfect, but on the bright side, Clan Song is entirely out of the picture. The competition is gone. It would be foolish not to make an attempt."

She looked at the rest of them.

"Plus, if we do conquer the Tomb of Ariel, everyone would be able to escape through its Gateway. Why, wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Summer Knight's face hardened.

"Lady Morgan… I'm afraid I will have to insist. If we do not leave immediately, there might not be a siege capital to return to when we try again next time. The whole continent might be lost."

She shrugged dismissively.

"Don't worry about that. We have four more days, at least…"

Their conversation was extremely interesting. Morgan's confidence that East Antarctica would hold for four more days at the minimum was also fascinating.

However…

Sunny found himself distracted.

That was because he suddenly felt a gaze. Someone was watching him, and from a direction where no one was supposed to be…

He did not turn his head, but instead looked around through his shadows.

In a distant corner of the glass chamber, a figure was reflecting on the fractured wall.

However, there was no one there to cast the reflection.

'That bastard...'

Noticing Sunny's attention, the reflection smiled and waved a hand.

…Or rather, a bloody stump.

One of its hands seemed to be missing.

Chapter-1227: A Friendly Invitation

The Black Skull was a death trap, so no one would be able to escape the Nightmare Desert through its Gateway. However, there was at least one other Citadel in this infernal region of the Dream Realm — the Tomb of Ariel.

The black pyramid that always loomed just beyond the horizon like an ominous mirage, but never grew closer no matter how far one went into the sea of white dunes. One of the main reasons why the great clans had come to Antarctica, in the first place.

Now that the expeditionary forces of both clans had been wiped out and the daughters of Ki Song fully withdrew from the race, Morgan decided to make one last, desperate attempt to reach the daemon's tomb.

Which was a piece of good news for Sunny and other members of the cohort. Sunny knew that reaching the pyramid was their best — and, perhaps, only — chance of getting out of the desert alive. The others understood, as well. Having a powerful Saint and a princess of Valor with them was a great boon.

Summer Knight and Morgan could make the lethal task of traversing the Nightmare Desert slightly less impossible to accomplish.

There was just one problem…

Without showing any emotion, Sunny stared at the reflection of Mordret through the shadows. The Prince of Nothing looked rather chilling… he was terribly wounded, his armor battered and covered in blood. Where one of his hands was supposed to be, there was now only a bloody stump. Even one of his eyes was gone, replaced by a gaping hole.

He looked like a corpse.

Nevertheless, there was a familiar smile on Mordret's face.

"Sunless. Ah, I am so glad to see you in good health!"

Maintaining a calm facade, Sunny furtively glanced at his companions. None of them seemed to have heard Mordret's voice… it appeared that it was being transmitted directly into his head.

Maybe what Mordret was actually talking to was not Sunny, but instead Sunny's reflection. In any case, it was a little disconcerting.

'Great. Now I hear even more voices…'

Mordret lowered his bloody arm and coughed awkwardly.

"Oh, right. I guess you can't answer without announcing my presence to everyone. How about you nod once or twice to indicate…"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then silently reached out to the reflection with the [Blessing of Dusk]. To his surprise, it actually worked.

Continuing to act as if nothing had happened, he sent a mental message to the mangled reflection:

[How about you get out of my head and go die someplace else? No matter what you're scheming, I'm not interested.]

Mordret blinked.

"Well, what a pleasant surprise. We can actually have a conversation. How nice!"

Sunny sighed. He was really quite exasperated.

[Why would I want to talk to you, bastard? This is all your fault! If not for your machinations, there would have been no battle. Then, I wouldn't be stuck in this damned desert!]

The Prince of Nothing looked at him with a smile.

"This is really uncalled for, Sunless. Ah, I'm a bit hurt. Sure, I might have pulled a few strings to make the battle happen, but how was I supposed to know that you would decide to participate in it on my family's side? After all, it was you who told me over and over again that you didn't want to have anything to do with the great clans. So… blaming me for everything is a little unfair.

In fact, I'm the one who is supposed to be disappointed and angry. All those lies!"

Mordret's smile widened.

"But, being the forgiving and broad-minded person that I am, I'm willing to put my grievances aside. Here, I've decided. I forgive you, Sunless… no need to even mention it!"

Sunny felt tempted to turn his head and stare at the reflection.

'This… this lunatic… has he completely lost his mind?'

He slowly exhaled.

[...What do you want?]

Mordret's reflection shifted slightly, avoiding a random glance from Sir Gilead. Then, he looked at Sunny and lingered for a few moments.

"I see that my sister has decided to try reaching the Tomb of Ariel. I suppose you are tempted to join her?"

Sunny frowned slightly.

[Yes, I am. Why wouldn't I be tempted? The Black Skull is now in the hands of a great abomination… thanks to a certain someone. So, the pyramid is our best bet to escape the Nightmare Desert.]

Mordret stared at him with a smile.

"Oh, but it's not. Don't listen to my sister, Sunless — she is young and inexperienced. In fact, none of you can reach the pyramid. It's impossible."

That finally forced Sunny to react. Turning away to hide his face from the members of the cohort, Morgan, and Sir Gilead, he looked at the reflection with a deep scowl.

[Oh, yeah? How would you know?]

The Prince of Nothing shrugged.

"Simple, really… it's because I've already seen Asterion try it once, and fail. So, let me ask you a question — if a Sovereign failed to reach the Tomb of Ariel, what makes you think that your ragtag team of Ascended can succeed?"

Sunny was startled. Mordret had just confessed a piece of truly shocking information… Asterion had already been to the Nightmare Desert? And it had happened while Mordret was still with him, so more than a decade ago, at least?

A thousand questions instantly appeared in his head.

[...I don't know enough to guess who can reach the pyramid and who can't. Does it matter, though? It's not like there is a better solution. But why did Asterion want to enter the Tomb of Ariel? No, wait… if even he had failed, then why did your father and Ki Song still send their people into the desert?]

Mordret chuckled.

"Because Asterion doesn't have to report to them what he does. I know, but they don't… and even I don't know what his motives were. As for the pyramid being the best solution — are you sure about that?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, then said reluctantly:

[No. If what you said is true.]

The Prince of Nothing grinned.

"It is so pleasant to talk to a smart person. Let's put aside the question of my honesty, for now… yes, the Tomb of Ariel seems like a solution, but it really isn't. My sister can't help you save yourself and

your companions, Sunless."

Sunny looked down with a wary expression.

[And I suppose that you can?]

Mordret stared at him for a while. His grin slowly faded.

"Yes, I can. I'm not doing it out of kindness, either… you need my help, but I also need yours. The strength of your companions, too — I need it. The more, the merrier. If we are to escape this hell, we'll need all the strength we can get. It is fortunate that we are able to talk, really — this ruin you're in is at the very edge of where my reflection can reach.

Ah, it seems that fate is on our side."

He sighed, then smiled again.

"So, Sunless… why don't you forget about trying to reach the Tomb of Ariel with my sister, and come challenge the Third Nightmare with me instead?"

Chapter-1228: Unattainable Mirage

Sunny had gone through many chilling trials in his tumultuous life, but the Nightmare Desert was, perhaps, the most harrowing ordeal of them all. Lost in a true Death Zone, pursued by a Great Nightmare Creature, and running out of time… he saw little hope of making it out of this tribulation alive.

Nevertheless, there were two paths he could take.

The first one was to follow Morgan to the Tomb of Ariel, and the second one was to follow Mordret into the Third Nightmare.

Both paths were equally lethal and veiled in uncertainty, making it hard for him to choose.

In the end, Sunny made the most prudent decision — he postponed making a choice by a few days.

After all, there was a time limit set by Morgan in her daring attempt to reach the black pyramid. Four days… if they did not arrive at the daemon's tomb in four days, Summer Knight was going to take her back to the waking world, leaving the rest of them behind.

So, Sunny was going to put his hopes in the Princess of War, and if she failed to accomplish her goal, he would answer Mordret's invitation and follow the only remaining path into a Seed of Nightmare.

The Prince of Nothing was not very happy with the delay, but he had no other choice except to agree with Sunny and wait patiently. He really needed the strength of Changing Star's cohort if he was to challenge a Third Nightmare… especially one that he knew nothing about, and would be entering without any preparations.

Masters were the best of the best among the warriors of humanity — unlike Awakened, who had no choice but to face the trials of the Spell and survive them, each Master had chosen to venture into their Second Nightmares voluntarily. Only the strongest and most resourceful survived and Ascended.

And out of those strongest, hundreds and hundreds had attempted the Third Nightmare in the last few decades. Yet… only a few dozen humans returned, thus becoming Saints.

That alone spoke about how deadly the Third Nightmare was.

Needless to say, Sunny was not very enthusiastic about venturing into the Third Nightmare at the ripe age of twenty. Maybe if he was a titan with seven fully saturated cores and another decade of experience behind his shoulders, he would consider it. But now…

He desperately hoped that Mordret was either lying or wrong, and that Morgan would be able to lead them to the black pyramid. Having to make a deal with the Prince of Nothing was the worst-case scenario.

'Gods. How did I end up being forced to put all my hopes in these two?'

The Valor siblings were the last people in two worlds he wanted to associate with.

And yet, here he was.

…Worse still, with each hour and every day that passed, it was starting to look more and more as if Mordret had been telling the truth.

Led by Morgan and Sir Gilead, the small group of survivors was moving deeper and deeper into the desert. They were constantly assaulted by torturous heat, which sapped them of all energy, will, and desire to live. The suffocating nature of the pristine sea of dunes had only affected them physically at first, but as time went on, its cruelty started to gnaw on their minds, as well.

It did not help that none of them could really sleep, gripped by the

fear of the cataclysmic battle that raged across the ancient desert at night. The further into the dunes they went, the more terrifying creatures would rise from the sands to wage war on each other. The ruins they sheltered in shook and groaned, seemingly ready to collapse at any moment.

There were more broken structures buried in the sand in the inner regions of the desert, but at the same time, less and less of them looked durable enough to withstand the fury of the eternal battle.

At the same time, the Nightmare Creatures they were forced to fight during the day were becoming more and more powerful. At first, Sir Gilead alone was enough to deal with them. Later, the valiant Saint would struggle to fend off the most dire abominations without the help of the Ascended.

Finally, there came a time when even Summer Knight became wary of their opponents. The group was forced to tread with utmost caution, lest they encounter something that neither the Saint nor the Masters would be able to kill.

That slowed them down considerably.

…And slowing down allowed the Gate Guardian — Skinwalker — to find their trail again.

They were still being pursued, and as time went on, the constant need to escape that pursuit was only growing more urgent. There were two reasons why the great abomination was getting harder and harder to avoid.

The first one was that Sunny and the rest could not allow themselves to move forward as swiftly as they had before. The second was that… the creature was learning.

The Skinwalker had access to the memories of the corpses it possessed, and through those memories, it was quickly learning about the waking world, the Awakened, about the powers they possessed, and about the way they thought. At first, it had only been able to study the memories of several dozen vessels that it had hunted down and taken in the desert, so the process was relatively slow.

But the creature had most likely escaped into the waking world, as well. How many vessels of the great abomination were there in Antarctica by now? Hundreds? Thousands?

...Millions?

Sunny did not know, but he felt that every time they had to escape from the Skinwalker's pursuit, it was rapidly becoming harder and harder to shake the abomination off.

Everyone was… tired.

Everyone was spent, battered, frightened, and slowly starting to fall into despair. The gauntlet of the Nightmare Desert was just too cruel, too harrowing, and too hopeless.

And worst of all, despite it all, the ominous silhouette of the black pyramid seemed just as distant as it had been at the start of their arduous journey.

Even Morgan, who had never allowed herself to show doubt or weakness before, was looking less and less indomitable with each passing day. The perfectly maintained facade of a fearless princess of the great clan was coming undone, revealing the face of a brave and ambitious, but ultimately fallible and human young woman.

She was spent, battered, frightened, and desperate too.

The difference was…

Morgan still had a way out. While the rest of them didn't.

Just like that, the fourth day arrived — once it passed, they would have been in the desert for a full week.

Emerging from an underground ruin, the members of the group shielded their eyes from the blinding sun and looked at the distant, unattainable mirage of the Tomb of Ariel.

Sunny's face was grim.

'Mordret said that it is impossible to reach the pyramid… but he is

wrong. Asterion was unable to get to it, but someone else did. The sybils… they reached it. They even went inside. So there's still a chance.'

Morgan's face was motionless. Her eyes were sunken and tired, but still burning with sharpness. There was no hint of being dulled in their vermilion abyss.

Grimacing, she took a step forward and said hoarsely:

"Come. We have not failed yet."

Chapter-1229: Seventh Night

A tenebrous stallion was galloping across the vast expanse of white sand. On his back, leaning tiredly in the saddle, sat a beautiful young woman in black garments. The steed and the rider were like a wave of darkness that absorbed the incandescent sunlight, and only the young woman's striking silver hair reflected the light back as it danced in the air.

Nephis was following a swift shadow that glided across the dunes in front of them, guiding the two back to the group. Cresting a tall dune, she saw a scene out of a nightmare. The immaculate whiteness of the sand had been painted red by blood, and grotesque corpses were strewn about, torn asunder and gaping with terrible wounds.

The dead Nightmare Creatures were both numerous and enormous in size. The desert itself had been upturned by the furious battle that had reaped their lives, and several tiny human figures could be seen among the gigantic corpses.

Her expression turned grim.

At the same time, down below, Sunny turned his head slightly and glanced at the black silhouette of the rider, which was outlined against the azure sky at the top of the dune. Wiping the sweat off his brow, he sighed tiredly and leaned his back against the scaly limb of a dead abomination, hidden in its shadow.

'She's back.'

Nephis had survived her mission… the rest of them had survived, as well, albeit barely. This swarm of Nightmare Creatures had been too tough even for Sir Gilead to handle — the Saint had dealt with the leader of the pack, a Great Beast, and the rest of them had faced off against the pack of Corrupted abominations.

Now, Summer Knight was severely wounded, and they were similarly battered and drained of strength. In any other situation, a Transcendent vanquishing a Great Nightmare Creature would have been a legendary feat worthy of a triumphant celebration, but now, they were just tired and afraid.

This was the first Great abomination — aside from the Skinwalker — they had stumbled on in the Nightmare Desert, but would it be the last? Certainly not.

They had not even reached the inner regions of this cursed land yet, and the situation was already so hopeless.

Nightmare descended from the dune, and the members of the group crawled out from the shaded spots beneath the gigantic corpses to meet Nephis.

She jumped from the saddle and looked at Morgan with a composed expression. The princess of Valor raised an eyebrow.

"How did it go?"

Nephis lingered for a moment.

"I lured that titan toward the Skinwalker's vessel. They fought, but more vessels showed up. The titan should be dead by now… there is still the sea of quicksand between us and the pursuers, with the thing that dwells below, but it won't delay them for long. We have several hours, at most."

Morgan let out a heavy sigh.

"Damn it. It was a desperate gambit, but I really hoped to achieve more."

She grimaced, then turned west and stared at the distant silhouette of the black pyramid with a grim expression.

By now, everyone knew that her desperate desire to reach the Tomb of Ariel, or at least get closer to it, was futile. Perhaps even Morgan knew, even if she refused to admit it.

Sunny was sure that she was not trying to conquer the black pyramid for their benefit, but still, he was almost touched. The rest of them had pretty much already surrendered… only Morgan continued to stubbornly cling to the impossible goal.

Sir Gilead shook his head.

"Lady Morgan… this is the fourth day. I promised to give you time, but we've made no progress. You need to accept reality."

The princess remained silent for a while, then winced.

"Sunset. We'll push forward until the sun sets. If nothing changes until then, I'll follow you back to Antarctica."

Summer Knight looked away, then nodded.

They could probably survive until the sunset… in any case, there was still the issue of finding a suitable spot for traveling between worlds. The handsome Saint glanced at Cassie.

"Lady Cassia, I will have to trouble you."

She simply nodded, expressing her consent to help Sir Gilead and Morgan escape the Nightmare Desert.

Sunny was also looking at the black pyramid that loomed just beyond the horizon. He was strangely calm.

'The Tomb of Ariel… how can one reach it?'

In fact, he had an idea. They had been moving into the depths of the sea of dunes for seven days now, encountering more and more dire dangers.

But maybe that was the reason that they had made no progress… traveling during the day.

Sunny had a gnawing suspicion that one could only get closer to the daemon's tomb during the night.

But if that was true… then it was really impossible for them to

approach it. Because the Nightmare Desert during the night was a place not suited for mortals.

It was the land of the dead.

With a sigh, he took a sip from the Endless Spring, dismissed it, and started walking.

'It's so damn hot…'

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They survived another day, even if some of them were on the verge of wishing that they hadn't. There had been more fights, more blood spilled. The Skinwalker was looming close, growing more and more inescapable.

The sun was falling behind the dark silhouette of the black pyramid, as if being pierced by its sharp tip. The Tomb of Ariel was just as it had been from the very start, seemingly within grasp but also utterly unreachable, as if mocking them.

Limping, Sunny stepped over the corpse of a slain Nightmare Creature and walked between two black obelisks that served as a gateway to a buried ruin. This place was going to be their shelter for the night — the seventh night they would spend in the desert.

It was also where Summer Knight and Morgan were going to leave them.

Inside a vast underground chamber hidden beneath the ruin, the members of the cohort were listlessly sitting on the ancient stone floor. Morgan was apart from everyone, nursing a broken arm. Her resilient body was littered with wounds, and she was too low on soul essence to heal them.

There was a dark and resentful expression on her face.

Everyone seemed to have tacitly agreed to give her some space.

…Well, Sunny was not someone who had a lot of tact.

Walking over to the princess of the great clan Valor, he lowered himself to the cool floor in front of her. Morgan looked up, momentarily confused.

"Ah… Master Sunless. You must be terribly disappointed in me. Sorry… it seems that I am not as capable of a leader as I thought."

He remained silent for a while, then shrugged.

"Actually, I don't care about that."

She smiled bleakly.

"Oh? If you have not come to chastise me, then what do you want?"

Sunny looked at her somberly.

"After you and Sir Gilead are gone, the rest of us are going to try challenging the Third Nightmare. That is the only way left for us, so… I just wanted to ask if Clan Valor was going to start harassing me again, in case I survive."

No one was allowed to become a Saint without the permission of the Sovereigns. It might have had something to do with what Professor Obel theorized once — that the appearance of Gates was innately tied to the advancements of humans on the path of Ascension.

It might have been just because the Sovereigns were unwilling to let anyone grow too powerful without becoming a part of their Domains.

In any case, Sunny wanted to get some assurances that he was not going to be hunted down by the great clans, on the small chance that he actually managed to return from the Third Nightmare alive.

Looking at him, Morgan suddenly let out a low laugh.

"Third Nightmare? Ah… you don't have to worry about that…"

He frowned.

The proud princess seemed to have lowered her perfectly maintained facade. If that was the case… he suddenly felt a compulsion to push

his luck a little.

"Actually, I have another question."

Morgan looked at him silently. Sunny met her gaze and asked with a hint of curiosity in his voice:

"It's a question that has been gnawing at me for a while. The great clans have been suppressing the Transcendence of independent Awakened for decades. An old man once told me that you might have been pursuing noble goals… like limiting the number of powerful Nightmare Gates that open across the world. Someone else told me that all you think about is whose Domain controls the most Citadels, though.

So… what is the real reason? And why does it seem that you suddenly don't care about it at all?"

He paused, and then added evenly:

"The great clans have also been at odds with each other for a long time, but you only decided to start a real war now that a whole damn continent is on the verge of being destroyed. Why is that? Huh?"

Sunny felt a little surreal. A few years ago, as a Sleeper, Nephis had warned him that merely knowing about the existence of Sovereigns and Domains could get him killed. And now, as a Master, he was directly asking such questions to the daughter of a Sovereign.

Well, it was not like Morgan could do anything to him right now. What punishment could be worse than leaving him behind in the middle of the Nightmare Desert? Sunny was already as good as dead, so there was no reason to hold back.

She looked at him for a while, keeping silent. To Sunny's surprise, there was no anger or disdain in Morgan's eyes. Only… a strange, grim amusement.

"You really don't know?"

He shook his head.

Morgan frowned and let out a hoarse chuckle.

"Well. Both of your questions… have the same answer. The probability of powerful Nightmare Gates opening across the world — we wanted to keep it as low as possible, yes. Wishing to control more Citadels — we wanted it too. But now, we indeed don't care about suppressing the number of Saints that much."

Sunny looked at her with a burning intensity.

"Why?"

Morgan smiled darkly.

"Why else? It's because there's no point in doing so anymore. The critical mass has already been reached. My father and Ki Song, they postponed it for as long as they could. But now, there's no way to slow down the pebble anymore. It has already become an avalanche."

She leaned forward until her face was mere centimeters from Sunny's and whispered into his ear:

"What, did you think that the Chain of Nightmares was going to stop with the Southern Quadrant? No, Master Sunless… it is just the start. Soon enough, all of Earth will be the same as Antarctica. Every continent, every city, every home. All of it… all of the waking world will be swallowed by the Dream Realm."

She leaned back, leaving Sunny staring at her in shock. His mind seemed to be frozen.

Morgan studied his motionless face with a smile, and then sighed.

"Two weak Domains can't withstand the future. Only one powerful Domain can. So, you see… one way or the other, either Valor or Song must fall. There can be only one king, and one throne."

She lingered for a few moments, and then stood up.

"I wish you luck, Master Sunless. Go, conquer the Third Nightmare, and become a Saint. Did you think that the great clans would try to stop you? No… now that the end has begun, we'll need all the Saints

we can get."

Morgan turned away and walked in the direction of Sir Gilead, her vermilion eyes drowning in darkness.

As she did, she stopped for a moment and looked at Nephis.

"Sister! I will wait for you in Bastion. Don't take too long."

With that, the Princess of War took Summer Knight's hand.

Soon, they were gone, leaving the six of them — Sunny, Nephis, Cassie, Effie, Kai, and Jet — alone in the underground chamber.

The echo of her words was roaring in Sunny's mind, leaving him paralyzed.

After a while, he shifted slightly.

'Oh... of course.'

Outside, the armies of the ancient dead were locked in an eternal battle, and a cold moon shone above the stygian edifice of the dreadful old tomb.

Chapter-1230: Hell is Empty

A suffocating cloud of pristine sand had blotted out the sky, and hurricane winds were raging across the vast sea of white dunes. The world was perfectly white and suffused with incinerating heat. The grains of sand cut the skin like knives, but six fragile humans stubbornly marched forward through the radiant inferno, covering their eyes with tired hands and struggling against the wind.

Sunny was at the head of the small column, shielded from the hurricane, somewhat, by Saint's indomitable back. There was a piece of black glass in his hand, and in it dwelled a reflection of a young man with one shining mirror-like eye.

"Hurry, Sunless… you are almost there, but you must hurry. The creature is drawing close."

'Shut up, bastard... I know... I know it all!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny pushed through the wind and walked forward.

He felt as if he had been thrust into a scorching oven. The Skinwalker was on their heels, as relentless and inevitable as ever, but at this rate, the desert itself was going to kill them before the great abomination could.

'What… a joke… six of the most powerful Ascended in the world… will be done in… by the environment…'

Wasn't it funny? His journey as an Awakened had started with almost freezing to death in the cold mountains, and now, he was on the verge of succumbing to the unbearable heat of the cursed desert. The Dream Realm was merciless to the weak, but it was also ruthless toward the strong.

Not that Sunny was particularly strong, yet.

Randomly, he remembered a part of the speech Nephis had given to the Sleepers in the Bright Castle, right before leading them to siege the Crimson Spire.

'The weak will die. The strong will die, too. And those who remain won't be the same... follow me... and you will never be slaves...'

He wanted to laugh.

The world was entirely white, and incandescent. They were not going to last much longer in the annihilating sandstorm. Sunny already felt ready to collapse… he could only imagine how the others felt, without the same elemental resistance as his. Everyone had their own tools to deal with the heat, of course, but still... they were all balancing at the very edge of oblivion.

But, luckily, their destination was already close.

Slowly, a massive dark shape revealed itself in the hurricane of pristine sand. Sunny froze for a moment, looking up.

In front of them, some distance away, a giant block of black stone lay between the white dunes, tilted to the side, its lines perfectly even and immaculately smooth.

It seemed impervious to the destructive force of the sandstorm, the cataclysmic fury of the eternal battle between the ancient dead, and even the cruel ravages of time… and yet, one of its ends was cracked, broken, and utterly shattered.

Sunny did not know what unholy blow could have damaged the indestructible black stone, and did not want to know.

The sight of it stunned him.

Not only because he recognized the block of stone for where it had come from, but also for what it was.

The entirety of it emanated a familiar ghostly darkness.

The giant block of black stone… was a Seed of Nightmare.

All of it.

…Beneath the Seed, shielded from the wind by its vast expanse, a monstrous winged abomination lay on the sand. Its powerful limbs and long tail were dwarfed by the size of the black stone block, but none of them were deceived — the creature was massive, and dangerous.

It raised its long neck and looked in the direction of the six masters, making their tired bodies tense up.

At the same time, Mordret's reflection smiled.

"Oh… don't mind me, Sunless. That body is really unsightly, huh? Let me change really quick…"

The abomination opened its maw, and a small human body fell out of it into the sand. A moment later, the creature suddenly dropped its head, lifeless.

The human body stirred.

The Prince of Nothing slowly rose to his feet, and then waved at them with a bloody stump. The wind carried his voice:

"Run! The Skinwalker is almost here!"

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then glanced at Nephis. Without wasting any more time, he gathered the last of his strength and dashed toward the giant block of black stone.

The rest of them followed.

They had already discussed everything that needed to be discussed. Everyone already knew everything there was to know about the nature of the Third Nightmares — how they were different from the previous two, and how they were similar.

They would be entering the trial with their physical bodies this time, for one. After all, there was no distinction between the body that

dwelled in the waking world and the body that wandered the Dream Realm once one became an Ascended.

That was something Nephis and Cassie had learned from Clan Valor, and shared with them. It was good to know.

Apart from this fact, though... the Nightmare they were going to enter was completely unknown.

The Skinwalker was breathing down their necks, so there was no time to hesitate.

Sunny reached Mordret and looked at him with a scowl.

"You better not pull anything once we're inside."

The Prince of Nothing lingered for a moment, then grinned:

"Ah, you took the words out of my mouth. Sunless… let's survive."

Sunny nodded, then turned to his companions.

What was there to say?

He forced out a smile and shouted:

"Everyone… stay alive! We will return as Saints!"

With that, he spared each of them one last glance.

There were sparks of white flame dancing in Neph's eyes. Cassie was pale, but full of unbreakable resolve. Kai was looking at the black stone with a sense of resigned trepidation. Effie seemed grim and determined. Jet… was smiling.

She shook her head lightly and grinned.

"Life is sure unpredictable… who would have thought that I'd end up challenging the Third Nightmare, after all?"

Soul Reaper laughed as she looked at Sunny.

"Sunny! Thank you!"

He stared at her for a moment, then shook his head.

'What a lunatic.'

With that, he turned around and took a step toward the black stone.

One step, two… three…

Slowly, the white inferno of the raging sandstorm disappeared, and all that remained was boundless darkness.

In that darkness, Sunny heard the voice of the Spell:

[Ascended! Prepare for your Third Trial!]

Its words echoed in the void.

[Thirteen million, seven hundred thousand, and seventy seven brave ones… welcome to the Nightmare!]

Sunny's eyes widened.

'...What?'

[End of volume six: All the Devils Are Here]